

BHUVAN SHOME

Bonophul

Translated by Lila Ray



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Bhuvan Shome

B. C. Mukherji 'Borophul'

Translated by Lila Ray

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One

ANIL arrived at the river landing early. He had cut straight across country, walking through the fields. His feet were covered with dust and small burrs of the kind called thief thorns by the local people covered his clothes. Anil discovered the boat-train had not yet arrived and the steamer was running late. He went down to the shore of the Ganges and gazed eastward a few minutes. No, there was no sign of the boat, not even a trace of smoke.

Birds, flying in a wedge, caught his eye. They were bar-headed geese. Anil looked at them keenly. The year before, he had shot three one after the other. Foring had been with him. Foring had worn a shirt with red stripes. He was slender and had strong yellow teeth, brown hair and blue eyes. Foring had eaten more than half the meat. He was a great gourmand. Anil invited him to come back this year. He had not come and he would not come, ever again. He had been killed in a car accident six months later. He had been an open-hearted, frank young fellow, incapable of keeping a secret. He had told

Anil how he had once committed a theft. Anil grew absentminded as he thought of Foring.

"Anil Babu, isn't it ? How long have you been here ?" Sakhi Chand, the train's ticket collector, had come up behind him. He had not noticed.

"I've only just arrived. Uncle Bhuvan is coming by this boat. I'm to meet him. The steamer is very late today."

"It is. Do you have an uncle ? I didn't know that. Where's he coming from ?"

"Sahebgunj. Bhuvan Shome. He's not related to us by blood but he's closer to me than if he were. We've known him a long time."

"Bhuvan Shome ? The A.F.S. ? Bhuvan Shome ?"

"That's right."

Sakhi Chand's eyes, nose, mouth, chin and brows drew together in a knot. He was mortified. He'd rather not have shown his feelings to Anil Babu. He controlled himself with an effort.

"I didn't know Mr Shome is an uncle of yours."

"He's a strict officer, isn't he ?" Anil smiled.

"He is. He dismissed his own son. You must have heard about that."

"I have." Anil nodded.

"Why is he coming here ?"

"To shoot ducks."

"Is he a good hunter ?"

"He likes it but he seldom bags anything."

"Birds aren't railway officers." With a bitter laugh Sakhi Chand turned away. Over his shoulder he asked, "How long are you going to stand there ? Better come home with me. The boat won't be

here for some time yet. We can have a game of chess."

"Fine. Has your wife come?"

"Not yet. Our caste makes quite a ceremony when a wife goes to her husband."

Sakhi Chand was a milkman by caste. A Bihari. But he spoke Bengali very well. By formally adopting 'Jadav' as their surname his fellow castemen had recently given a boost to their social status. Many were learning to read and write. Sakhi Chand was not at all like a Bihari in his manners and his speech.

Sakhi Chand's father-in-law lived only seven or eight miles from the river landing. When he was posted here he had hoped his wife would join him but her family elders had objected. They contended there was no day in the almanac suitable for a journey in the next three months. And, in addition, this same Bhuvan Shome had reported against Sakhi Chand. Sakhi Chand was at fault, of course, but who doesn't take a bribe or two nowadays? Who foregoes the little extras that come his way? The officer in charge of freight, that fat black fellow, had set himself up very well! He, Sakhi Chand, didn't take more than a couple of rupees at a time. Any British boss would have given him a scolding and let him go. But Shome—an imitation Britisher, you know—had gone out of his way to submit a lengthy report. Sakhi Chand had asked at the office. The report had not been received yet. If shome hadn't already sent it in, he would, he was sure to. The fellow was an scoundrel! Sakhi Chand felt somewhat hopeful

when he discovered Shome was related to Anil Babu but—

“Mr. Shome was here about a month ago. Did he visit you?”

“No, he was on duty. Now he's taken leave for hunting.”

“Is he going to stay with you?”

“Where else? He doesn't like to stay with anybody. It's not his practice. But with us it is different. He loved my father like an elder brother and he loves me like a son.”

Sakhi Chand's hopes burned a little brighter. “He's so strict,” he said hesitantly. “I don't know whether that's a good or bad quality. I've been told he's reported against me on the flimsiest grounds. With prices what they are I'll be in trouble if I lose my job. B.A.s. and M.A.s applied for my post. If you could only—”

Sakhi Chand stopped. He dared not go on. Anil Babu had no difficulty in understanding what it was he was thinking.

“I can't do anything like that,” he cried, “It'll produce the opposite result. He gets terribly annoyed when anybody makes a recommendation of that kind to him.”

“Does he?” Sakhi Chand murmured politely. To himself he muttered, “Mule!”

The rest of the way to Sakhi Chand's quarters they walked in silence. The small dwelling was a thatched structure with reedmat walls. A band of sunlight lay across the narrow porch.

“Let's sit in the sun. Would you like to? The

weather's turned cold."

"Since yesterday. Yes. The sun feels good."

A small table of light wood stood in a corner of the porch. Sakhi Chand dragged it into the light. Then he entered the house and brought out two tin chairs. He re-entered. A sharp sound followed, repeated over and over.

"Anil Babu, please come here, will you?" he called.

Anil went in. Sakhi Chand was struggling futilely with a table drawer.

"It's stuck. See if you can open it. You're strong, aren't you? This table was made by Sarban Barai. He charged a good price and said it was a good job. Just see! Will my wife ever be able to open a drawer like that?"

"Why bother about it now? Let's play chess."

"The chess-men are in the drawer."

"Oh!"

Anil gave the drawer a tug. It was stuck fast.

"Green mango wood. That's what he's made it of. That's why it's stuck. Now you hold on to the table while I jerk the drawer. I'll pull hard. See that the table doesn't move."

"Just a minute. Move it a little so I can brace myself against the wall."

Anil was strong. The drawer came open at the first pull. But a framed photograph on the wall behind Sakhi Chand's head crashed to the floor and splintered in pieces.

"Oh What have I done? There. There. There." poor Sakhi Chand exclaimed in grief and pain.

"Have you cut your head?" Anil went to him solicitously.

"No, my head's not hurt," Sakhi Chand said, "It's my heart. Do you know whose photograph this is? Take a good look at it."

He handed the picture to Anil. A young girl smiled up at him. Across the bottom a name was scrawled: Mrs Boidehi Jadav.

"My wife," explained Sakhi Chand, "she goes to a school, a minor school."

"Can she speak Bengali as well as you do?"

"Better. Better. Her mother's people live at Pakur. They all know Bengali."

"Who took the photograph?"

"My brother-in-law. He was given a camera as a wedding present. His wife's people gave it to him. He goes around taking pictures of everything. He even took pictures of us. Give that to me. I'll have to send it to be framed again, today. To Sahebgunj. Ghosal will take it for me. It's got to be at once."

Sakhi Chand wrapped the photograph neatly in paper and tied it securely with twine. Then he put it into a tin trunk.

"Now let's play."

They went out of the house together, put the chess-board down on the table on the porch and began to play.

Two

ON the open deck outside the steamer's First Class cabin Bhuvan Shome lay back comfortably in a folding chair. He was deep in thoughts of himself and his life. Whenever he was able to be alone for a time, he took the opportunity to abandon the present for the past and it was of the past he was thinking now as he puffed slowly at his pipe. He was wearing European clothes.

Shome was a man of sixty. He was physically very fit and looked younger. His hair had thinned in front and grey showed in his sideburns. Several teeth in the back of his mouth were missing but, he was strong in spite of that and his age, according to the office records, was fifty-four. His retirement was due in a year's time. Shome could not hope for an extension of his service or re-employment in some other capacity although it is the usual practice. His service record was excellent but none of his superiors were pleased with him. Shome had never mastered the art of flattery. He had fought all his life and was battle-scarred. He had never

bowed his head to anybody.

His British bosses had appreciated his sturdiness and independence. Under their regime he had risen from a simple clerk to the post of the Assistant Traffic Superintendent of the Railways. Such a career would not be possible at the present time. His caste was more important than his service record now. The question of his fitness for the post would be the last consideration. Had he taken part in the *satyagraha* movement? Had he been to jail? Fitness was secondary and could be dispensed with if other things were found satisfactory. An officer has nothing to worry about if any minister is related to him. Bhuvan Shome had none of these assets. His term of service would not be extended and he knew it. And Bhuvan Shome also knew that, in some former life, he must have committed a grave offence. There was no other explanation of the punishment he had had to take in this.

At times he felt he might have been happier if he had been born in an African jungle. Both in his official career and in his home, nobody had ever shown him any consideration—his parents, his brothers, his sisters, his children or other relatives. His father had died when he was sixteen. He had been fully conscious to the end, dying with the name of God on his lips. Possibly he had gone to heaven. To his son he bequeathed numerous debts, numerous indigent relatives and a large household. The terror he had felt in that now distant time still made Bhuvan Shome shake with anxiety. There had

not been a cent in the house. Shopkeepers refused credit. Wherever he turned he was met with blank blackness. He had not known when or if the sun rose in the morning or whether, if it did, it shed light on anything.

Suddenly Bhuvan Shome raised his hands to his forehead, pressing them reverently together. He always made this gesture whenever he thought of Jogen Hajara. Hajara was a friend of his father's. It was Hajara who had taken an interest in the family. Hajara was a good man, a kind man. What if he had married three times? Hajara worked in the office of the Deputy Traffic Superintendent and the DTS entertained a good opinion of him, Hajara put in a word for Bhuvan Shome. Shome was given his first job. Hajara's own son had just passed the Entrance Examination but he gave precedence to Bhuvan Shome.

That sort of thing could not be done now. Children of the gentry have nothing to expect. Only cobblers, street cleaners, carrion carriers and their kind can get jobs. The highest rank acceptable is that of a barber or a milkman. For a Brahmin or a Baidya or Kayastha to have sons needing jobs had become almost an offence. The people of the country had turned into quadrupeds after independence. Thievery was rampant. Not many people, only a handful in fact, even bothered to buy train tickets any more. And they got away with it. The railway guards and ticket collectors let them. They put a few rupees in their own pockets. Large bundles were carried in brake vans free of cost.

What good did sending in reports do when the culprits were caught?" Some relative or other always knew or was connected with a minister who got them off scotfree. Independence? Freedom for the scum! For the lowest of the low! For the gentry it was disastrous.

Bhuvan Shome pulled at his pipe, holding the smoke in his mouth for a minute before letting it go. He rocked his legs as he cast up his gains and losses, reviewing the years that were gone. His life had been continuous struggle. His mother, as long as she lived, was intently taken up with one thing only—perfect propriety. She found the slightest flaw intolerable. Bhuvan Shome had done his best but she was never satisfied.

She was obsessed by the notion that life was for her, after her husband's death, a kind of expiation for some wrong she had done in a former birth. She felt she had nothing really to live for and lost all interest in everything. Her greatest grievance was that her daughters had not been married yet. If her husband had been alive she said, the girls—silly, foolish creatures—would certainly have found homes in king's palaces! Bhuvan Shome had spared no effort to find good husbands for them. He had had to incur a debt of five thousand rupees to pay for their weddings and made a gift of all his mother's jewelry as well. Birinchi Lal and Jagannath had been the best he could get.

There are much worse bridegrooms in the country. Other girls make homes for them and spend their lives quite happily. But his wonderful sisters were

above all that. They declared they could not live in backward villages and refused to accompany their husbands. His mother agreed. Aren't there snakes in villages? Stagnant ponds? Malaria and other afflictions? How could they live there? The girls were adamant. Before long their husbands joined the already overcrowded household, settling in comfortably. The burden of their families was thrust upon Bhuvan Shome. Nieces and nephews had to be brought up. He found jobs for the two sons-in-law with a lot of trouble, but they did not move out of the house. His mother wouldn't hear of it. And they did not contribute a pice to the household expenses. Their salaries went to purchase expensive perfumes, cream, *rabri* and other delicacies which they ate secretly. They took it for granted Bhuvan Shome would support them. They added to the family generously, fathering, between the two of them, fourteen children. The children ran wild in the house. They shouted and screamed all day and all night. It was impossible to sleep or rest.

Bhuvan Shome had planted a garden on which he spent a great deal of time and attention. The brats uprooted every single plant. They began to steal. Every coin they could lay hands on disappeared. They even took pieces of his wife's jewelry. But his mother would not allow them to be punished. She lied glibly in their defence, watching over them protectively. Bhuvan Shome never got a square meal. The devil's brood consumed everything. He had eaten only rice and *dhal* all his life. The cheapest kind of *dhal*, the least expensive vegetables.

Sometimes the water in which his rice was boiled was added to the *dhal*. He had grown so accustomed to this diet, he no longer even liked any other kind of *dhal*. The choice dishes he was sometimes served at parties did not agree with him. He did not enjoy them.

As a young man he had not been able to drink milk. There was a cow and the cow gave a quart or two of milk every day but he was never given a drop. Part of the milk was boiled down for his mother. She needed it like that because she was in the habit of taking opium. The rest was diluted with water and given to the children. Three or four were always at an age when milk was their main food. How could Bhuvan Shome deprive them ?

One day he felt dizzy on his way home from office and had a fall. Dr. Chandan was called in.

The doctor said his blood pressure was low and prescribed fish, meat, eggs, milk. Without a nourishing diet how could he keep his health ? His mother suggested he incur a loan. But Bhuvan Shome knew the debt would not be paid by his mother. He would have to pay it himself. He could scarcely make ends meet as it was. His tongue was fairly hanging out. So several days later he went to the doctor and asked him to prescribe a tonic. "I can't eat a special diet like that sitting in front of the others," he explained, "And I can't buy that sort of food for the whole family. Please, doctor, recommend a patent tonic" Dr. Chandan always considered his patient's likes and dislikes. If

somebody had a taste for sour things he recommended sour things. Even a diabetic patient, if he pleaded hard enough, could get the doctor's permission to eat what he liked. Dr. Chandan was strict about only one thing. He never gave a false medical certificate. Bhuvan Shome recalled the doctor's serene face, his white eyebrows and white beard. He had prescribed a tonic, some foreign concoction. Bhuvan Shome had forgotten the name. He remembered there was chicken extract in it, old port and cod liver oil among other things. The price was so high he did not buy a second bottle.

Bhuvan Shome rose, pushing the folding chair aside. The breeze was cold and had an edge to it. He took a knitted cap with ear flaps out of his hand bag and slipped it over his head. It was comfortably warm in the winter air. His eldest daughter-in-law had knitted the cap for him recently. She was clever at fancy work but she knew nothing about making dried pulse balls or chutneys. She bought these from a shop. She and her like would be glad enough to buy cooked meals from shops too if they ever became available. He had heard of *payesh* hotels in Calcutta. At the rate the country was speeding down the road to perdition what could he expect? How things are changing!' Bhuvan Shome mumbled to himself. Then he turned to look at the sandbanks in the river. There were sandbanks on both sides of the steamer. He watched them attentively for a while. Not a single bird was to be seen. Where were they? Anil had written that there were lots of them. Flocks and

flocks. Where?

"Shall I move your chair, sir? The wind is strong here." The words, spoken close to his neck, made Bhuvan Shome jump. He turned around. The boat's T.T.S was standing behind him with an obsequious expression.

"You need not worry about that. I can do it myself if necessary. Mind your own job."

The young officer was nonplussed. He turned to go.

"Listen."

He came back.

"What's your name?"

"Bikashendu Gupta."

"You should get rid of the mistaken idea you have. You cannot get around me by flattery. Never. I'm a man of the old school. Duty first, self last. That's my motto. Do your duty well. That'll please me. But if you neglect your work you will not be spared, no matter how much you twist your neck salaming me. Get that?"

"Yes, sir."

"All right. You may go."

The young man departed, his head bowed. Bhuvan Shome stared after him. Suddenly he discovered that he liked him. Young men of the Baidya caste are usually somewhat brash. This boy wasn't. He took a notebook out of his pocket and entered the young man's name in it. If an opportunity came he'd give him a lift. Bhuvan Shome stuffed tobacco into his pipe. Then he sat in silence for a few minutes, pipe in hand. A

kingfisher was flying low over the water. It paused, hung for a moment in the air with only its wings moving, then plummeted to the surface of the river. The next instant it rose with a small fish in its beak. The spectacle delighted Shome. He sucked his pipe. Then he remembered it had not been lit. He tried unsuccessfully to light it several times. The wind was strong. He entered his cabin and struck a match expertly. When the pipe began to draw he returned to his chair. The kingfisher was gone. He settled himself comfortably again and puffed slowly as he returned to his memories.

His Brothers had caused him as much trouble as his sisters. Neither had been good students. They just refused to study. Every year they failed. Until they had failed three or four times they were not promoted to a higher class. They had moustaches by the time they reached Class IV. Bhuvan Shome had kept after them. But the Headmaster of the school, Mahadev Babu, was upright and strict. He struck their names off his role. He explained to Bhuvan Shome that the two boys could not be allowed to remain in the school. They were teaching the younger boys to smoke cigarettes. Their education ended there.

His mother wanted him to put them in a boarding school, preferably in Calcutta. Bhuvan Shome could not afford it. His mother nagged about it for a long time. His brothers may not have been good students but they made a name for themselves in other ways. Bipone won acclaim for his skill in playing female roles in the local theatre.

And khokna became a well-known football player. He was a sturdy centre forward. It was fortunate they were good at something. Would they have sprouted more tails by passing their B.A. and M.A. exams? And if they had, their tails would have been tucked in eventually so they could buckle down to a job. Both of them got jobs, good ones. His histrionic powers won Bipone a place in an engineering office. The Head Clerk was so moved by Bipone portrayal of Sita that he broke down and wept. The very next day he sent for the boy and gave him a job.

Khokna had the same kind of luck. The Mohan Bagan team was scheduled to play against another football team that was rather insignificant. Everybody concluded the Mohan Bagan was certain to win. The insignificant team won because of Khokna. He was the centre forward. The match was exciting. Among the spectators was an officer of McKenzie Lyall. Khokna caught his attention. Khokna's prowess as a football player won him a job. Bhuvan Shome pulled at his pipe strongly. It all seemed like only the other day!

He rose to his feet suddenly. Hundreds of mallards were flying over and settling on the mud flats of a sandbank nearby. He stared at them avidly. Could he reach the place by the boat? What arrangements had Anil made for him? How could he know? He gazed at the ducks as long as they could be seen.

Hunting was his only recreation now. It was more than a pastime. For Bhuvan Shome it was an



escape, a liberation. All his life he had sought ways to get away from the family for a while, to forget its troubles. Nothing he had tried had proved wholly satisfactory. Once it had been painting. An Anglo-Indian railway guard had taught him the use of water colours. Mr Brown had been an excellent fellow even though he was not himself sometimes during occasional bouts of drinking. Bhuvan Shome had drunk a little in his company. Brown always maintained there is no real difference between wine and water. The difference is in way they are regarded. He'd guffaw and add the price is the real difference, the reason for so much prejudice. Water costs nothing. Wine is ten rupees a bottle. In those days a bottle of good Scotch whiskey could still be purchased for ten rupees.

Brown had taught him how to paint. Shome painted or tried to paint for a long time. But Sunday was the only day he had off. All kinds of demands were made on him on Sundays. He was told to buy rice for the family, to buy *dhal*, inquire why the washerman had not come, call the tailor because the boys needed clothes. Nobody would let him sit down with paints and brushes. Not a single one of the many stalwart dependents who lived in his household at his expense lifted a finger to help him. If by any chance they offered to, his mother promptly refused. She said they would not be able to, that they did not know how to buy rice, *dhal* and so forth.

Bhuvan Shome had to attend to everything him-

self. When, after the chores were done, he sat down to paint while the others took their noonday siestas, a horde of inquisitive kids crowded round him like insects around a lamp during the rainy months. They handled his things, pulled at them, dropped them, messed them up. His sister's son knocked his paints off on to the floor once. Shome couldn't say a word even when he overturned his water bowl. Their mothers pulled long faces. One day when he came home from office he found mud smeared over a half-finished picture. His wife was unperturbed. "Bilu or Nipu must have done it," she said, "they may want to paint like you do. Boys imitate their fathers, don't they? They can't be blamed for that. Yesterday Bilu lit a cigarette exactly the way you do." He felt like taking the boys by their legs and banging them on the floor but he had had, as usual, to repress his feelings. A few days later his big brush was missing. "A mouse must have taken it," said his wife, "I've been asking you to do something about the mice for a long time. You just don't listen! What's a brush? The wretched creatures have gnawed holes in the goddess Lakshmi's carpet." Bhuvan Shome bought a mouse trap. One of his nephews caught his finger in it. That caused a terrible fracas—doctors, injections, medicines. It cost him fifteen rupees down. Not a single mouse was trapped.

His whole life had been like that. Anything that pleased him was regarded with the utmost hostility by the women in the house. No obstacles were placed in his way overtly. They couldn't do that.

But they were sullen and non-cooperative. His wife forced him to give up painting. Nobody can paint in an atmosphere which is not congenial. It is impossible. He tried and he might have been able to do a little but his wife refused to let him. Bhuvan Shome's mother had imposed her will on his in many things as long as she was alive but she had been of enormous help to him in one matter. She had kept his wife under control. His wife was an ill-tempered tigress. As long as her mother-in-law was alive she had not been able to make a sound. She began to throw herself about as soon as the old lady was dead.

Bhuvan Shome pulled at his pipe abstractedly. He rose, paced up and down the deck for a time and then resumed his seat. Yes, he had had to overcome his passion for painting. The death of Brown had hastened the decline in his interest. His death was strange and terrible. Brown took occasional trips, going nobody knew where, after his retirement from the railway service. Later it was discovered he spent his time in the fields and woods, painting. One day he set up his easel near a bend in the railway line, quite close, a little too close. An engine broke loose, ran off the rails and cut him to pieces. The driver was not to blame. He had not even seen Brown. When he did see him it was too late. The engine could not be stopped. To jam down on the brakes at the speed it was going would only have made it turn turtle. Brown had been painting a sunset. His own blood coloured the canvas red.

Yes, Bhuvan Shome had given up painting. He did nothing for long time. But holidays without

something to do are extremely tedious.

His next hobby proved as unsatisfactory as the first. He got himself into trouble at the outset. A hobby is a hobby. It is ruined if business gets mixed up with it. To try to do something of benefit to the family and pass one's leisure pleasantly at the same time is to attempt the impossible. Such a project will be neither lasting nor happy. Quite by accident an English cooking book fell into Bhuvan Shome's hands. In it he found recipes for chutneys, Turkish delights jams, jellies and preserved fruits. He took it into his head to try them. So he dug into his savings and bought more cook books on the same subject, English and Bengali. He bought the pots and pans he would need and even had a special cooking range built on the back porch so he could work standing up. He even offered to have a range of the new type constructed for the use of the women but they turned it down, with laughter. How amazing women are! They thought the new range a joke. So the range on the porch was exclusively for his own use. If he had been able to afford it he would have purchased an iron oven of foreign manufacture also. But he had to borrow to make the range.

A day came when he embarked upon his new enterprise. He hoped to kill two birds with one stone, to enjoy himself and benefit the family at the same time. His wife had never cooperated with him in her life and she refused to do it now. She confined herself to a single comment but what she said rankled for a long time, like buckshot. "You've done so many things," she said, "and made yourself so

famous, the only thing left is to fast on the eleventh of the bright fortnight in the wintry month of Magh." Women are fishwives, all of them. Some wear clean clothes and some didn't. That is the only difference. He remembered hearing somebody remark garbage piles up on Siva's head ! How true ! Bhuvan Shome was not deterred. He set to work with more enthusiasm than ever.

From early morning till late at night every Sunday he busied himself with his new hobby. The children of the house proved very helpful this time. They were even more enthusiastic than he was. Without helpers this kind of work is bound to go slowly. The children were always at his beck and call. Off they ran at a word. How eager they were ! They worked quite hard actually as long as Bhuvan Shome's interest in his hobby lasted. He could not have accomplished half of what he did without them. The women in the family not only did not help, they continually found fault with what he was doing, picking quarrels.

His wife had never taken the interest in the boys' school lessons. She did not even know which class they were in. But now one day she declared stridently that the boys should spend Sundays doing their homework instead of wasting their time running errands for their father. Silly errands ! Bhuvan Shome had been furious but he had not raised his voice in protest. In course of time his wife's words lost their power to hurt. She was something to put up with, like a wart or a mole. He got into worse trouble when his culinary preparations were at last

ready. Who was to consume all these bottles of jam and jelly, chutney and murabba ? And biscuits ? The younger children enjoyed them for a few days but the older children refused to touch them. They tasted them when forced to but they kept their heads down and smiled slyly as if they knew a joke was being played on them.

“Why,” his wife demanded one day, “do you make them eat this inedible stuff ? They’ll be sick.” The fuss was terrible when Bhona came down with diarrhoea. Had he never been sick before in his life ? Everybody promptly forgot that he was born with a weak digestion. , Lame old Dr. Kundu proclaimed loudly, “There’re symptoms of food poisoning.” The rogue ! On the sign in front of his house was inscribed: Ghanashyam Kundu, M.D.F.D.S. The F.D.S. meant Female Disease Specialist. The meaning was explained in a Bengali notice tacked below the English one. The strong young husbands of poor young women set for hours on the bench beneath it. The doctor asked them all kinds of outlandish questions.

The original Kundu had been a grocer. Ghana was his son. He had broken his leg climbing the fence of the Chakravarty’s orchard to steal green quinces. That had not knocked any sense into him. He limped all over the town, getting into all kinds of mischief. Then one day he hung out a signboard and became Dr. Kundu. He set up practice in the front om of his house. Privately he poked fun at Dr. Chandan, an estimable man in every sense. Dr. Chandan had saved his life. What a country !

Everything is possible. Bhonta's sickness had cost him a lot. He had to call in an expensive doctor. The new doctor said the child did not have food poisoning but that it would be better not to give the children any more of his preparations. What could he do about that ? His wife put a lock on the cabinet in which the jams and jellies were kept. Nobody, she said, would be allowed anywhere near them. An elderly widow, one of his father's distant cousins, was the only person who liked them. She maintained that his mango chutney was excellent and if nobody else ate it, she would. There were only four bottles of mango chutney. She ate them. What was to be done with the rest ? At last Bhuvan Shome turned to Kesto for help

Kesto was Bistu Mitter's son and Bistu Mitter was one of his friends. Kesto ran a general store. One day Shome asked Kesto if he would sell off the rest of his preparations in his store. Kesto was a good boy. He said quite frankly that he was willing to display them in his store but that nobody would buy them. Everybody, he said, had heard about the food poisoning. Anyone you asked mentioned it. "What a country ! Dreadful ! It is really dreadful !" Bhuvan Shome aloud. Then he gave his pipe a final puff and stood up. The pipe had gone out.

Bhuvan Shome made his way to his cabin, thinking to relight his pipe inside but he stopped at the door. The wind was too strong. The tobacco was blowing out of the pipe's bowl. It was futile to try to light it again. It was sure to go out. It would be better

to smoke a cigar. He turned back and extracted a cigar from his bag. He bit the end off expertly and returned to the cabin. He recalled something that had happened years before in connection with a cigar. It had seemed very funny to him at the time. He gave Hanu, his sister's son, a ten rupee note and sent him to buy some cigars. Hanu came back without them, declaring the note had been stolen from his pocket in the bazar. Cigars were brought from Kesto's shop on credit.

Bhuvan Shome had not disbelieved the boy entirely. There are plenty of pickpockets around. But a breath of wind turns the wheels of justice. Hanu's younger brother, Janu, found the note in his pocket when he went to take a bath. Hanu had taken his shirt off and Janu seized the opportunity to rummage through his pockets. Possibly he would have made off with the note himself if his aunt had not seen the whole proceedings. Janu was only eight years old but he never overlooked a pocket. Bhuvan Shome's mother had named her daughter's sons very appropriately, Hanuman and Jambuvan, the monkey and the bear.

Bhuvan Shome lit his cigar and went back to his chair. The rows of jams, jellies and chutneys rose before his mind's eye. They had been given away free. Nobody wanted them. None of his close neighbours would have anything to do with them and he did not offer them any. If anybody in their families felt at all sick after sampling them the rumour of food poisoning would revive. He had presented the stuff only to people who lived at a safe distance.

He had to use persuasion.

When he went out on an official tour he'd take a few jais with him. "I've made it myself," he'll say modestly, "Try some. Tell me how you like it." No Bengali had ever so much thanked him, much less complimented him. On the contrary, they always found some fault. "I couldn't eat it," Mrugen Babu said a few days after Shome had given him some mango slices in vinegar, "They had a rotten smell." It was probably the first time in his life that Mrugen Babu had ever tasted mangoes in vinegar. Gupta declared Shome's quince jelly was too-tart. Charan Mukherjee commented, "Do you call these biscuits ? They're just like cloth." But Mr Smith, the foreman, thought differently. "That's good jam," he said. He had thanked Shome at once and written a letter as well afterwards, enclosing another recipe for jam.

He was an English man! Englishmen are different. Altogether different. They appreciate talent, know manners, understand how to do what. That's why they rule the world. Others think they can get the better of them ! Just look at what the British did! They saddled India with Pakistan before they agreed to leave. Everybody quarrelling with everybody. Why talk of Pakistan? Was there any peace in Hindustan? Enjoy your independence! Mountbatten told Mahatma that Gandhi his Congress was with him, the Englishman. What did that mean? It meant Gandhiji's followers had begun to bleat like sheep at the mention of power. They killed Gandhi. In a way it was good they did. He may have ended up

by dragging every member of the Working Committee into a mosque and forcing them to read the *kalma*. The statements he was making pointed in that direction. Shome didn't like to think of that. He esteemed Gandhi greatly in his heart of hearts. But he had to admit the man was strange.

He recalled something that had happened long ago. Mr. M. K. Gandhi had not become the Mahatma then. And Bhuvan Shome was not an A.T.S. He was still a lower division clerk, and travelled with a Third Class Pass.

At Barbarowa Station he got into a Class III compartment that was extremely crowded. A person sitting in a corner reading a newspaper attracted his attention. He was a small thin man in a turban much too large for him. Next to him was an old man with a beard. Who were they? So many kinds of people travel by train. At first Bhuvan Shome ignored them but at last he was forced to look their way. The old man began to cough. It was a bad cough. Instead of spitting out of the window he spat upon the floor. The man in the turban looked up from his paper and protested, "What you've just done is wrong. Why did you spit on the floor? Spit outside." The protest was justified, the way in which it was made polite. The old man was a vicious character. He did not answer at first. He was short of breath and was panting. When his breathing eased he rolled his eyes and declared he had caught a chill and the cold had settled in his chest. If he put his head out the window, he said, he might catch another chill. That was why he spat on the floor.

He would continue to spit on the floor. Anyone who did not like it could move to another compartment. The compartment was nobody's private property.

Bhuvan Shome felt anger rise and burn within him but he said nothing. He knew from experience that poking one's nose into other people's affairs gets you into a lot of trouble. So he kept quiet. But the thin little man in the turban did an astonishing thing. He tore a piece off his newspaper, wiped the old man's spittle off the floor and threw it out of the window. The old man stared at him angrily. He did not say anything. The coughing started again, racking the man's chest. Again and again he brought up mouthfuls of thick mucus and spat it noisily on the floor. The man in the turban wiped up the spittle with newspaper as before and threw it out of the window.

Everybody in the compartment was now watching. Our people enjoy watching things from a safe distance. A crowd collects quickly anywhere something is going on. The old man spat on the floor again. For the third time the man in the turban wiped up his spittle with newspaper and threw it outside. The old man stared at him wide-eyed for a few minutes. Then he asked, "What are you doing?" The thin man said nothing. He only smiled. His smile had a wonderful sweetness. Bhuvan Shome had never seen a smile like that before. Everybody waited with bated breath for the coughing to start again. It was almost like watching a football match. The coughing began. This time the old man did not spit on the floor. He put his head out of the window

and spat outside. Everybody laughed. Not long afterwards the train pulled in to a station. A group of gentlemen were waiting on the platform, carrying garlands of flowers. As the thin little man in the big turban got out they came forward and greeted him respectfully. He was a barrister from South Africa, a person by the name of M.K. Gandhi. The mystery was solved.

Bhuvan Shome swung his legs back and forth as he pulled at his pipe and looked at the sandbanks.

Now that his life was approaching its close he liked to muse on all the things he had seen. They were so many! How many times the morning had dawned, how many the evening fallen. To him it seemed only the other day he had gotten his first job. What was that? A kingfisher? He stood up. No, not a kingfisher. It was a bird he had seen many times but he did not know its name. Was it some kind of duck? No, it didn't look like a duck. He turned around. Another passenger was watching the bird too, through binoculars. Bhuvan Shome went up to him.

"What bird is that? Do you know?" he asked as he caught the man's eye.

"In English it's called a tern. The Latin name is *sterna aurantia gray*. I don't know what it's called in Bengali. I've heard it called a *gang chil* but I think that's wrong."

"Oh!"

Bhuvan Shome went straight back to his chair. The man had to show off, did he? Could he find no better place to display his learning? Why did he

have to tell him the bird's Latin name? This kind of ostentation is getting to be quite a fashion. All the man wanted to do was to show off.

To Bhuvan Shome the company of his fellow men was becoming distasteful. When he had first taken to hunting after abandoning his cooking experiments he had always brought someone with him, often more than one. Nowadays he came alone. His companions used to drive him wild. He missed the feeling of freedom he came to find.

Bhutnath used to talk about his own accomplishments all the time. He knew nothing else. He told stories of how he had dumbfounded his British boss, explained why his boss's wife liked him so much, why she always sent for him. His son, he said, had excellent handwriting and his wife's was pearl-like. When the Headmaster of the school promoted his son he was not being partial; the boy's handwriting was like print. Mr. Godson took him into his own office when he saw it. And his son-in-law! His son-in-law was a rich man—so rich he never went anywhere unless first class accommodation was reserved for him. Trifles like that. Unending. Bhutnath did not know how or when to stop talking, he rambled on and on.

Once Bhuvan Shome brought Dwijen with him instead of Bhutnath. He had had no idea what a hell his company would be. In the office Dwijen occasionally let slip an obscenity or two but that had been surreptitiously, on the sly. Once out he dropped all pretence and let his unhealthy proclivities take over completely; it was like letting a horse

have a good run. Bhuvan Shome had never heard such debauched talk. He was shocked. Dwijen had failed his departmental exams three times but he could quote Havelock Ellis and the Kamasutra line by line. He recited whole chapters, going on by the hour. He'd tell a story, dance his eyes and laugh raucously. He laughed until he got a stitch in his side. Then he'd bend over, pressing his arms against his sides and murmur, "My God, it'll kill me." He laughed so loudly he sent the birds flying. They rose out of the water of the lagoon and kept carefully out of range. Bhuvan Shome had not brought Dwijen again. A man like that is not fit company out here, in these empty open spaces. Yet he considered the stories he told amusing.

Chhattu Sen was his next companion. He was another queer one. He claimed all the credit for the hunt. He'd dash forward and fire at every bird he caught a glimpse of. If a bird dropped he aggressively declared it was his. If two dropped both of them were his. "What'll I do with two?" he asked, baring his teeth. "One or two are nothing. A devil's brood! Come on. Let's see how many more we can get." Do birds linger after several rounds have been fired? Chhattu Sen had come with him twice and it had been the same both times. Bhuvan Shome had not brought him again.

Kartik Mukherjee had come with him several times but he was an unlucky fellow. They had not seen a bird's feather, let alone a bird. He brought very bad luck. Once a greylag goose had been

hit in the leg. It flew some distance before it dropped. They caught it again. But it slipped out of Anil's hand when they gave it to him and got away. After that Bhuvan Shome had not brought Kartik with him.

He took nobody with him, not even Anil. Anil was a good boy. He had no unpleasant manners or odd traits. But Bhuvan Shome did not enjoy shooting in his presence. Anil got angry when he missed. Anil's aim was unerring. He was twenty-five and Bhuvan sixty. Like all young men Anil did not appreciate the difference. Whenever Shome missed he frowned so severely Shome could not look him in the face for an hour. He said nothing but his silence itself was disconcerting. So Bhuvan Shome hunted by himself. He took nobody with him. But Anil made the necessary arrangements of course.

Bhuvan Shome found a special pleasure in going alone, the pleasure of being able to do exactly what he liked for as long as he liked. Nobody objected, nobody advised, nobody talked into his neck. He was completely free from his official responsibilities, office work, his neighbours, the tedious hypocrisy of toothy smiles and devious talk. The sky was over his head, the earth beneath his feet, the green of vegetation all around him, forests, jungle, fields, meadows, uplands, rivers, canals, marshes and marshland birds. Nobody frowned at him, nobody laughed. He could do what he liked, for as long as he liked. He could fire his gun as many times as he cared to, shoot at as many birds as he

liked, it didn't matter whether he missed them or not. Hunting was the ostensible reason why he came, but it was not the real one. He did try to shoot a bird or two but he was too old now to enjoy eating meat that much. He gave any bird he bagged to Anil. There was nobody at home any more.

Nobody. The harshness of it struck him suddenly. His wife had died years ago, about twelve months after she performed the *brata* of Savitri. The *brata* rites protect women from dying before their husbands so it was much to her credit. His brothers lived at their places of work, one in Calcutta and one in Allahabad. Birinchi and Jagganath were both dead. Birinchi had had a demonical appetite. Several pounds of rice and *dhal* were nothing to him. Towards the end he had gone blind and suffered from chronic diarrhoea.

Jagganath died of typhoid. He caught the infection at Rampurhat where he went to attend a feast. He had been a glutton too. His sister, Chhabi, was a widow. She lived with her sons. One lived at Jamalpur and the other at Liloowah. Bhuvan Shome's boss had given both of them jobs on the railway although he had not asked him too. His boss had had a high regard for him. Shome never asked a favour or humbled himself, obsequiously bowing his head. His British bosses had appreciated that more than anything else. Bilu, his eldest son, had become very Western in his ways. He had gone abroad at his father-in-law's expense and was now living in Delhi. To his way of

thinking being a saheb, meant being intensely selfish. He was concerned with himself, his job, his wife, his children. The younger son, Nipu, had, until recently, lived at home with Bhuvan Shome. He had passed the competitive exams and entered the railway service. But he ruined his reputation.

Shome had not understood what was going on at first. He discovered it during a hunting trip. That trip he bagged a lot of teal, twenty or twenty-five. He gave most of the birds away, keeping only five or six. These he took home with him in the hope that Nipu would cook them for him. The cooking in his house was done by a widowed cousin who had been without a place to go. She was a distant relation, not a close one. And she was most reluctant to touch any kind of meat. Bhuvan Shome respected her feelings and did not insist. When she saw the birds she exclaimed, "This is too bad. Nipu won't touch them. You'll have to cook them yourself. I'll get everything ready for you and give you a separate stove." Bhuvan Shome was surprised. Why wouldn't Nipu touch them? What had happened all of a sudden? His cousin explained. Nipu had become a disciple of Jotta Baba. For some time now he had been on a vegetarian diet. And he rose at dawn every day to do breathing exercises, pressing his nostrils alternately while he inhaled and exhaled.

Bhuvan Shome cooked the birds himself. When Nipu came in he asked him, "I'm told you've turned a vegetarian. What's it all about?"

“My guru has forbidden me to eat meat,” Nipu answered, “I’ve been given my initiation, you know.”

Bhuvan Shome called the boy servant and sent him for some wood apple leaves. There was a wood apple tree behind the house with branches that hung down low. The leaves were not long in coming. Bhuvan Shome turned to Nipu and said, **“Write the mantra your guru has given you on these leaves. Go and throw the leaves into the Ganges. Then come home and sit down to a good meal of duck curry and rice. That magic stuff won’t do in this house.”**

Nipu did not say a word. His face darkened. Then he turned away and went out. Shome was unable to force him to eat the meat. A day came when the boy disappeared, leaving without any notice. Shome made inquiries. He had not been to the office. He had not taken leave either. Much later he discovered the boy had gone to Benares to attend his guru’s birthday celebrations. Shome had not overlooked his absenting himself from office without leave just because he was his son. On the contrary, he felt he should be all the stricter when the offender was so closely related to him. The boy was living in his guru’s ashram now, teaching in the brahmacharya school there. He was a teacher! A boy who had passed his Intermediate Exams in the Third Division, after failing twice. Bhuvan Shome congratulated himself on not having arranged a marriage for him, for the poor girl who was his wife would have been sacrificed.

Bhuvan Shome was all alone in the house now. He remembered that again. The only other person there was his senile cousin. The house he had taken so much trouble to build, worked so hard for, sought the help of so many people for, borrowed money at exorbitant interest for, that house was tenantless, the haunt of sparrows and small bats. None of his nearest of kin were there. When he, Bhuvan Shome, closed his eyes for the last time, it would crumble into a ruin. Nobody would take the trouble to have it repaired or keep it in good condition. There would be nothing but a pile of rubble and broken bricks in the end.

Bhuvan Shome drew slowly on his pipe and rocked his feet. No, he was not at all interested in shooting birds. He had not come out here to do that. He had come to get away from the crowd, to be by himself for a while in the open, with the wideness of the earth around him. Bhuvan Shome needed that. But he would have to bag a bird or two. He had to show Anil and Chhattu Sen that he still could, when he wanted to, hit one. It was true he missed most of the time. His hand shook when he pressed the trigger. But he could hit a target when he tried hard enough and he had to prove it. Anil would want to come with him of course but he would go by himself, alone. The man with the binoculars was glancing in his direction.

What an odd fellow ! He was talking to himself ?

Three

The boat edged up to the landing place. The train was waiting. The boarding area, which had been deserted, quickly filled with people. The whole of India seemed to be there the crowd was so diverse, there was such a variety of baskets and bundles and baggage, of costumes, and manners, from the coarse to the refined. Passengers were calling, coolies shouting, vendors crying their merchandise, beggars shrilly whining, police barking commands, bustle and haste. The passengers who had come by the boat-train had arrived earlier; others were debarking. They met and mingled like two rivers, flowing from opposite directions. Anil waited in a comparatively uncrowded spot on high ground, watching the flood of people around the steamer. He saw Bhuvan Shome's solar hat first, then his cigar. He pushed forward and bowed to his feet.

"Enough. Good—"

Bhuvan Shome was pleased although he protested. So many young men nowadays refuse to bow before their elders. Some make only a perfunctory

gesture. A few have adopted the Bihari custom of greeting all and sundry with a *namaste*, others shouted *jai hind*. The only thing he had not yet heard anybody say was the deprecatory *Ram. Ram*. Young people consider it humiliating to bow to a person's feet. He remembered how the son of one of his friends had come to visit him on the occasion of *vijaya*, eaten the traditional sweetmeats in large quantities very greedily, and neglected to bow to him. What could be more illmannered? Bhuvan Shome had seen even that. Anil was different. He was a boy of good family. Breeding shows.

"What's that you have?"

Anil was carrying a paper bag.

"Kolai *dhal* I've bought it for you. The *dhal* in Harban's shop here is always the best."

"Have you got any assafoetida at home?"

"Yes."

"Please tell the cook to put it in the curry. Is your wife well?"

"Oh, she's fine, but she isn't here. She's gone to visit her people."

"Who looks after the cooking?"

"There's a Brahmin cook?"

"Maithili? Then that's that. Is he any good?"

"Very."

"Let's get on the train. Where's the coolie? Here you! Bring my things over here."

He walked towards the train. Anil followed. A Class II compartment was empty. Bhuvan Shome got in. Seating himself beside a window he lit a cigarette. "I've got some good cartridges this

time, foreign make," he said, turning to Anil. Then he added, laughing, "Remember the last time? What a fool I was! That sort of thing is not in my line. Nobody'd use a cow to thresh grain if a goat could do it. Of course I lost some money."

Anil smiled broadly. The year before Bhuvan Shome had used cartridges he had made himself, at home. From the outside they looked all right. The sound they made when they were fired was good too, like a real bullet's, but the grape shot in them did not get far. After a couple of yards it scattered over the ground. Not a bird was so much as touched. The thud of the gun sent them up into the air, flying fast. Shome crawled on his hands and knees to get as close to them as he could but he had not hit a single duck. •

"What arrangements have you made this year?" Shome asked, "Have ducks come?"

"Lots. There're on the sandbanks."

"How can I get to them?"

"I've arranged a cart. My own. Early tomorrow morning I'll take you to Kisanpur. You'll have to walk from there. Lots of ducks are out there. Pintails, teal, mallards, red-breasted geese. All kinds. I've already been out there once. If you'd like to have me along I can go again."

"No thanks, I'll go by myself."

Anil expected that. He was prepared to discuss the advisability of Shome's going alone and was about to bring up the subject when Sakhi Chand Jadav appeared. He was carrying a large water

pipe, brand new. Sakhi Chand bowed to Shome, greeting him with folded hands and the respectful *Bihari namaste*. "No small water pipes are available," he explained, "Radhanath Babu bought this one yesterday. It hasn't been used. As good as new. Please take it."

Sakhi Chand set the pipe down in a corner of the compartment, pressed his hands together again, bowing in Shome's direction and got out. He had the expression and manner of a wet cat. As he left he pressed a half rupee coin into Anil's hand. Anil had given him the money to buy a pipe a little earlier.

Sakhi Chand's abject manner reminded Bhuvan Shome that he had drawn up a case against him. The report had not yet been sent in. He must do it as soon as he got back to the office. He was growing forgetful. Was it age?

"What's the water pipe for?" he asked, looking at it.

"It's for you. I bought a pipe from Katihar but it broke. So I gave Sakhi Chand the money and asked him to get another one. Good pipes are not available locally."

"Give the pipe back. I won't smoke it."

"Won't you miss your after-dinner smoke? You always have one. I've got some excellent tobacco for you."

"Not in the least. Take the pipe away."

Anil did as Bhuvan Shome directed. Picking up the pipe he took it out of the compartment.

About an hour later Bhuvan arrived at Anil's house. He bathed and ate his lunch. The Maithili

Brahmin's cooking was really good.

"He's better than a woman," he exclaimed, "It's not often one finds a cook like this. Take care of the boy." Whenever Shome was particularly pleased with anyone he called him affectionately a *byata*, boy.

Everything Shome needed for a good smoke was ready except the pipe. Good *ambari* tobacco. Charcoal chips, a good mouthpiece. Only the water container was missing.

"You've got a lot of banana trees," Bhuvan Shome said looking around, "Can you cut one with a good thick stem for me? I'll make my own water pipe. I can."

It was done. Bhuvan Shome settled down comfortably on West porch of the house. He was ready for a good long smoke. He exclaimed, "There've been times I've smoked holding the mouthpiece in my bare hands. And that fellow thinks he can pass a pipe off on me!"

Anil was making up a bed for him inside the room. He smiled. Bhuvan Shome had been in the habit of talking aloud to himself for years. And he talked exactly as though he was speaking to somebody.

"Uncle Shome," he called, "the bed is ready. You ought to get a little rest."

"I'm not in the habit of sleeping in the daytime. I won't be able to sleep. There's always the office. On holidays I hunt or fish. But I'll lie down for a bit."

Bhuvan Shome lay down, picking up an English

novel to read. He always enjoyed a good book lying in bed. This book he had purchased at the railway book stall on his way here. He frowned before he finished the first page. In the first two paragraphs two murders took place. A girl and her aunt were both shot dead. Not two revolvers. Three. Three guns were found in the room. A complicated case. He read on, plodding through several more pages and then closed the book with a loud snap. How stupid ! Extremely stupid ! He could not sleep. He looked at the photograph of Anil's father that hung on the wall opposite the bed for a long time. Then he said aloud, "You're out of it, *dada*. You're well out of it. You were a good man, a man of virtue. If you had lived you'd have run into a lot of trouble. You were too good for us. That's why you left in such a hurry. Who knows what fate has in store for us !"

He got up, opened the door and glanced into the next room. Anil was nowhere to be seen. But Bhuvan Shome smelt smoke. Cigarette smoke. Bhuvan Shome smiled. The boy had started smoking ! Cigarettes ! He was smoking secretly. Out of sight. That was good. The boy was really a good boy. What else could the son of a father like his be ? A good father. A good son. So many boys nowadays think nothing of rudely blowing smoke into their elder's faces. Bhuvan Shome put on his shoes, slipped his shirt over his head and descended the stairs cautiously. He went to look at the plot of land on the South side of the house. Bhuvan Shome had decided to build a house of his

own there some day. He would have had nowhere to go when his ancestral home was sold to pay his father's debts if Anil's father had not taken him in. He had taken the whole family in.

Anil's father had been generous and charitable. "Stay here," he said, "Stay here for the present." He had got hold of a plot of land for Bhuvan Shome at a price that was nominal and the landlord demanded only a moderate *salami*. The foundations of his house were laid. Anil's father said he could move into the town later, when his circumstances improved. But his mother insisted on moving into the town at once and the house here had never been completed. Bhuvan Shome was forced to borrow money at a high rate of interest to purchase land in the town. The plot here still held a place in his heart.

Many memories were associated with it. Buchkun had been alive then. Buchkun was his servant. Dulal had been here too. Dulal, otherwise Togor or Tuni. Whenever Bhuvan Shome came here on a visit he went to see the plot of land. This time he found it fenced. He could not go in. The year before it had not been fenced. Had somebody bought it? Bhuvan Shome stood beside the fence. He saw that a thatched hut had been erected in the middle, where he had planned to build his living room. Two women were inside pounding gravel. One of them smiled shyly and the other drew her veil over her face when they saw Bhuvan Shome. He turned away. When he came back to the house Anil was there.

"Where have you been, Uncle Shome ?" he asked, "Coffee's ready."

"Coffee ? Have you taken to drinking coffee ?"

"No. I've bought some for you. From Katihar. One can't get anything here, not even decent tea. I know you like coffee in the afternoon."

Bhuvan Shome gazed into Anil's face for a long time. "Since you've gone to so much trouble for my sake, I'll drink it. But you shouldn't have done it."

"Why not ?"

"You treat me like a stranger. I'm a member of the family. I'll drink and eat whatever you do and enjoy it. It will be a pleasure. I feel uncomfortable when you make special arrangements for me."

"No, no, why do you say that ? You did the same for my father. You've brought things for him yourself many a time. He liked tobacco from Gaya, roasted *moong dhal* and cow's ghee from Calcutta and rice from Dinajpur."

"You have not understood me correctly. Forget it. How long has the coffee been in the pot ?"

"Two or three minutes."

"Let it steep a little longer."

They went into the house together. The coffee break duly came to an end. The Maithili Brahmin cook entered, carrying a large time piece.

"Is it running ?" Anil asked, taking the clock from him, "He broke it last time."

"He says it's running."

"Whose clock is it ? What's this all about ?"

"The clock belongs to me. The headmaster's son

borrowed it. His exams are in the offing. He wants to get up early and study. I sent for it because tomorrow morning we'll have to get up early ourselves."

"The boy's always asking for things. It's lucky for me: my eyes, ears and nose are not detachable. He'd ask for them if they were. He played my gramophone until it can be played no more. He sent it back with the spring broken. Not a single record is intact. That of course spares me a lot of trouble. Try the alarm and see if it works. Who knows whether it'll ring at the right time or not? When do you want to get up?"

"When do we have to start?"

"At two. It'll be three by the time we're dressed, have tea and set out. We ought to reach our destination while it's still dark. The cart driver is spending the night here."

"Is the cart here too?"

"The cart's mine. I bought a new pair of water buffaloes this year."

"You used to keep oxen. Why did you buy buffaloes? Water buffaloes are not very good-tempered beasts. A water buffalo is Yama's totem animal."

"Buffalo carts are the only carts that can ply during the rainy season. The roads get so bad, the oxen can't pull. I hear there's going to be a motorable road. The Central Government will pay for it!"

"I've heard that too. I don't quite believe it. Some of these politicians are good actors. They

speaking well on a platform. To hear them you'd think they're about to bring the moon down from the sky and set it in the peasant's candlestick. The others are thieves, petty thieves. The money will be spent. There's no doubt about that. But for what? They'll probably divide it among themselves. There'll be no road. Don't expect one."

Bhuvan Shome lay back in his chair and lighted a cigar. For a while he smoked in silence. "I'll have supper early tonight," he said, "A light supper will do. I'll go to bed early."

"Rice cakes have been made for you. You like them, don't you?"

"Can your Maithili Brahmin make them?"

"He can make anything. He'll have some lunch ready for you to take along."

"Fine. There's nothing but sand dunes and mud flats out there in the river. If I get hungry I'll be in trouble."

"You'll find a small village. There's one out there a little farther on. You'll be able to get milk."

"Who wants milk? I can't drink the stuff!"

Four

At exactly three o'clock in the morning Bhuvan Shome, murmuring an earnest prayer to the goddess Durga, climbed into the buffalo cart. Anil had spread a comfortable bed inside. The mattress was thick and soft. There was a blanket, a pillow and a quilt.

"Uncle Shome, lie down and take it easy. Cover yourself with the quilt. The night will be almost over when you arrive. Are you sure you do not want me to go with you? You don't know that part of the country. You've never been there before."

"No, no, you need not come. You'll get a chill standing there in the cold. Don't stay out. Go back to bed."

The cart started to move, Bhuvan Shome quickly realised that if the water buffaloes kept on at the pace they were going, no sleep would be possible for him. Not only that, his bones might not be intact when he reached his destination.

"What's your name?" He asked the cartman.

"Bhutta."

"Go a little slower, will you ?"

"Yes, Hujur."

For a short time the cart moved more slowly. Bhuvan Shome wrapped the quilt around him and lay down.

He was comfortable. The bedding was well padded. His eyes closed. He was sinking into a pleasant doze when he was rudely awakened by the buffaloes. They had quickened their pace again. He raised himself on an elbow and put his head out. A slender curved moon had risen. The light was faint for it was the dark fortnight but what it showed him made him shudder. Elephants would have run for their lives if Bhutta had done to them what he was doing to these poor beasts. He was thrusting his feet between the hind legs of the buffaloes and tickling their bellies with his toes. "He'll kill both of us !" Bhuvan Shome muttered under his breath. What were those buffaloes with their long wide horns not capable of doing if the tickling incensed them ?

"Bhutta, my child."

"Yes, Hujur."

"Don't swing your legs. Cross them and sit still."

Bhutta looked back at him in surprise. He did not understand what the gentleman was asking him to do.

"What ? What do you want me to do, sir ?"

Bhuvan Shome could not see the surprise in his face. It was still too dark. But he realised Bhutta

had not understood. He did not know Hindi well and had never tried to master it. With Biharis he always spoke English or Bengali. If the person he addressed knew neither of these languages he used Hindi but his Hindi was broken, halting and imperfect. It had never occurred to him he might get into trouble because of his ignorance of Hindi dialects. The buffaloes were going faster and faster. The curved roof of the cart banged against his head. Anil had put him in the hands of a madman. Bhutta kept on tickling the buffaloes' bellies. He'd be lucky if they didn't dump the cart in a ditch or a pond. It was so dark. At his age broken bones don't heal easily. Old Chatterji died after breaking his leg. Gangrene had set in.

"Don't," he managed to stutter at last, "don't swing your legs like that. Tuck them under you."

"Then how can I make the animals go?"

"Never tickle buffaloes."

"What does tickle mean?"

Bhuvan Shome did not know the Hindi equivalent of tickle. He contented himself with saying :

"Don't let them go so fast."

"Anil Babu said we should reach our destination while it's still dark. We've got a long way to go."

"No, no, child, take it easy. Go slower."

"But the sun'll be up and there'll be no ducks."

Bhuvan Shome grasped the gist of what he was saying with difficulty. He was desperate.

"What if there isn't? Go slow, I tell you."

Bhutta paid no attention. Slapping a stick across the back of one of the buffaloes he cried, "Yon

move like a gentleman, you wretched crocodile !”

Bhuvan Shome understood every word of that. His curiosity was aroused. He had never heard anything like it before. But Bhutta was only doing what is an acceptable practice when somebody is called a monkey. What was wrong about it ?

“Go a little more slowly, child, I don’t want to lose my life.”

“There’s nothing to be afraid of. Why don’t you lie down ? Stay down.”

With that Bhutta gave a sharp twist to the tails of the buffaloes and made a clucking sound with his tongue against the roof of his mouth. Bhuvan Shome felt the futility of any request to desist. In the first place he did not have an adequate command of the language. He could not explain. And Anil had given instruction to Bhutta. Anil was his master. Anil had told him to see that the gentleman reached his destination before daybreak. Bhutta would do what his master told him. But if the cart kept going like this every joint in his body would come loose. He would not be able to hold his gun. He decided to try an indirect approach. Bhutta might go a little slower if he could be made to talk about other things, if his attention was distracted. If Bhutta kept his mind on the buffaloes Bhuvan Shome’s plight would go from bad to worse. But what could he talk about ? Bhutta was ignorant of politics. He knew nothing of the failings of the railway administration. He did not read English novels. He would not understand gossip. Bhutta might respond if Shome talked about agriculture but Shome knew

nothing about it himself. At last he opened the conversation on a personal note

“Bhutta That’s a fine name. Where did you get it ?”

“My aunt ”

“Your mother’s sister ? That’s fine !”

Bhutta launched into the story of his birth. Bhuvan Shome wondered if the boy was a second Buddha as he listened. Bhutta had been born in a corn field. His mother was harvesting ears of corn. She died right there, in the field, after Bhutta was born. His aunt adopted him. It was she who had brought him up. His father married his aunt when her husband died. A corn field is not the Lumbini Gardens but there were other parallels between their life stories. Bhuvan Shome’s ruse succeeded. Bhutta paid less attention to the buffaloes and their pace eased off considerably. He felt better. But Bhutta started beating the poor beasts with redoubled energy as soon as his story was told, making a raucous whistling sound through his nose. He twisted their tails and thrust his legs under their bellies. He seemed anxious to make amends for his neglect. The animals dashed desperately forward, in fear for their lives.

“Slower Slower A little slower ”

Bhutta looked back at him with a smile, the kind of smile with which elders regard frightened children. Bhuvan Shome could see his face now. It had grown lighter. Anger blazed through him. The fellow dared to smile at him ! It was not the time to show his anger, however, so he had recourse

to other tactics.

"What do you like to eat, Bhutta ?" he asked.

"Hujur ?"

"What do you like to eat ?"

Bhutta looked at him. He was laughing.

"Do you like molasses or chili with mustard oil ?"

"Anything. It all tastes good to me."

"Do you like rice ? Or chick pea meal ? Chapatis ?"

"Chick pea meal."

"Which vegetables do you like best ?"

"Bitter gourd."

Unleavened bread and bitter gourd ! What an odd combination !

"Potatoes and potols ?"

"Yes, a little of things like those. But bitter gourd fried with onions and made into balls with *magar dhal* flour is best. It's really good."

The cart had slowed down noticeably. Bhuvan Shome decided to stick to the subject of food as long as he could. He tried to imagine how bitter gourd, fried with onion and made into balls with *magar dhal* flour, tasted. The idea was nauseating. Yet it was Bhutta's favourite dish. He had not been named Bhutta for nothing. All thought of food of any kind was dissipated by the next thing that happened. All around him birds began to call, raising their voices together. Day was breaking. Birds always call at dawn. But to Bhuvan Shome, at this particular moment, it was a phenomenon so beautiful, so unparalleled, he lost his power of

speech. He sat up. The calling of the birds was not unexpected but to him it was a surprise, an incomparable surprise. He listened in silence.

The buffaloes had stopped their galloping. The road was better and they ambled forward with a slow swinging gait. Even the beasts seemed affected by the wonderful event taking place all around them. Bhuvan Shome noticed a flush in the Eastern sky. It rose and spread. It was all the more delightful to Shome because he was a city man. Bhutta ignored it. Water is no mystery to a fish. It is part of his daily experience. A factory chimney would have had a greater attraction for him. He was worried about only one thing and that was how to get his passenger to his destination in time. He started working on the buffaloes again. Bhuvan Shome did not protest this time. He even rather enjoyed it. The morning arrived, bringing light with it. He could see the fields of green stretching away on both sides of the road. He gazed at them entranced. What could be so green? Paddy? No. Paddy is not grown in this part of the country. He asked Bhutta. Bhutta gave a longwinded reply.

“What barley or gram?”

“Wheat, barley or gram?” Which was which? Bhuvan Shome became suddenly very conscious of his ignorance. He did not know. To him it seemed he had spent his whole life learning useless and important things.

In the East the sky had grown redder.

Then he saw something that fascinated him. From the centre of a field a small bird rose straight

up into the sky with a flurry of wings and began to sing, filling the empty heavens with melody. Then it dropped downwards, disappearing into another field. Another small bird rose and sang, another and another. The air round overflowed with song.

“Bhutta, what bird is that?”

“Bhartha—”

Bhuvan Shome did not understand a word Bhutta said. If Bhutta had been able to say the bird was a lark he would have understood at once. The word Bhartha had no meaning for him. Bhartha was a local form of *bhardwaj*, the lark's proper Hindi name. If Bhutta had used it Shome would have understood just as little. Bhutta explained, in his rough jargon, that the bird nested in the fields and laid its eggs there. Shome hadn't known even that much—Bhutta did. Bhuvan Shome felt mortified at his ignorance. But he was so moved he soon forgot his embarrassment.

The cart rolled steadily on. He saw many more birds. Some he recognised. Others he didn't. He discovered that Bhutta knew very few of them. Those whose names he did not know he said were 'jungle' birds. The names he gave those he claimed to know were probably mistaken. One or two errors were obvious even to Shome. He called the fork-tailed shrike a blue jay.

“If it's not that it's something else,” Bhutta was unperturbed. He grinned from ear to ear.

“Whoah! Who-o-o-a-a-h!” Bhutta jumped down from the cart in a flash. One of the buffaloes had broken loose, tossing off the yoke. The cart

lurched to one side, hanging at a dangerous angle. Bhutta could not control the buffalo. It swerved around and galloped off in the opposite direction. For Bhuvan Shome it was awkward moment. He was at a disadvantage. He had been trying to light a cigar. The second buffalo was also straining to get away. He had to give up his attempt. What a mess !

"Bihoniya ! My God ! A bihoniya !" Bhutta began to shout in the greatest alarm.

"What's a bihoniya ?"

"Buffalo. Get out of here, Babu. Get out. Quick !"

Bhuvan Shome jumped down from the back of the cart. He had no idea what it was all about. He found out as soon as his feet touched the ground. He saw a strange buffalo in a field not far away. It was huge, very black and its horns were exceedingly muddy. Swinging its head backward and forward it was advancing slowly emitting a series of deep low grunts. It did not look in the least benign.

There was a large silk cotton tree nearby. Bhutta pointed to it and waved his arm, Shome was to climb the tree.

"Quick. As fast as you can" Bhutta ran up, lifted Shome bodily and carried him to the tree. Setting him on his shoulders he cried, "Quick. That's a wicked animal ! Catch hold of that branch."

Bhuvan Shome grasped the branch and swung from it. Bhutta held him, pushing him up. Shome

watched the fight that followed from the tree. It began before he was well up. The strange buffalo charged the buffalo that was still with the cart. He charged with terrific force. Bhutta flailed at him with a pair of bamboos tied together with a rope. Bhuvan Shome was astonished at his courage. Where did he get those bamboos? He did not know a pair of bamboos tied together is always carried in carts. They are used to prop them up.

Bhutta kept on fighting bravely. One of cart's buffaloes had fled when it caught sight of the bihoniya. The second followed suit now. The bihoniya, seeing that both its enemies had run away, turned and made off too. There was no reason for it to stay. It had come to defend its territory. Bhuvan Shome understood the significance of that later. Bhutta explained. A bihoniya is a stud buffalo. It does not allow another male anywhere in its area. If a bull buffalo intrudes the stud buffalo will fight to drive it out. The continuous grunting had been the bihoniya's battle cry. The fight is always a fight to the finish. It either kills the intruder or dies in the attempt. This particular stud buffalo was well-known in this part of the country as a fierce and dangerous animal. No buffalo anywhere around had been able to defeat it. Several had lost their lives. The doctor had lost one of his best animals.

Bhuvan Shome had seen the entire encounter from his seat in the tree. When all the three buffaloes had abandoned the battlefield he became aware of another peril, closer to him. The tree was swarming

with red ants. He was wondering what to do when Bhutta came up and cried, "It's all over, Hujur."

Bhutta was terribly put out. His face showed his comfiture plainly. He seemed to feel it was his fault the bihoniya appeared so suddenly. The poor boy was sweating in the chill of the winter dawn. A finger on his right hand was hurt. He ignored it. He was mortified that his master's guest should have been put to so much trouble. He lifted the cart and propped it up on the two bamboos. Then he looked at Bhuvan Shome apologetically.

"It's all over," he repeated.

Bhuvan Shome was more than anxious to get out of the tree. The discovery of the ants had alarmed him. They could cause a great deal of damage if they got inside his clothes. He jumped down without waiting for Bhutta to help him. Then he wondered what to do next. The cart could not proceed. Would it be prudent to go ahead on foot? Bhutta had succeeded in driving him off once. Could he do it a second time? It was probably hiding somewhere, waiting for an opportunity to charge again. It hadn't gone far. What were those bushes? Bhutta said they were pigeon peas. The bihoniya had gone that way. He had seen him from the tree.

Bhutta assured him the bihoniya would not come back, not now. What should they do? Bhutta suggested they go to Mahender Singh's field shack. It was not far. More prosperous farmers build small shacks in their fields in this part of the country in order to keep a watch on their crops.

Bhutta wanted to take him to Mahender Singh's in the hope that another cart might be available there. Mahender Singh had a cart of his own and he had bought a good pair of oxen at the Britter Fair this year. Mahender Singh had a high regard for Anil Babu. He would be pleased to look after his guest. The Ganges was not far from his fields. The sand-bank would be within walking distance. Walking was the quickest way to reach it. Bhuvan Shome could walk the distance if he felt like it. The cart would have to go round by the road, a much longer route. Bhutta would see him safely there before looking for his master's buffaloes. Then he'd come back for Anil's cart.

It sounded allright to Bhuvan Shome. Quite reasonable. And there was nothing else to do. He had to agree. Fortunately the bihoniya had not rammed the cart and his things, his gun and his cartridges, were not damaged. He was dressed in European clothes. When he lay down in the cart he had taken off his overcoat. Now he put it on again. Putting his cartridges in his pocket, his gun over his shoulder, his hat on his head, he followed Bhutta. The lunch Anil had provided was in a tiffin carrier. Bhutta took that. An army flask in which Shome carried drinking water hung from his shoulder. This was all he needed.

Noboday was in Mahender Singh's shack when they reached it. It was a small building with clay walls and a low thatched roof. A high porch ran all the way around it. On the Eastern side there was a wooden bedstead, quite strongly made. In

the cleared space in front of the shack was a well. There was nothing else. A boy cutting grass on an open plot of land a short distance away was the only human being in sight. Bhutta put the tiffin carrier down and set out in his direction. Bhuvan Shome sat down on the bedstead and lit his pipe. It seemed to him a good smoke would help him to find a way out of his predicament.

Bhutta came back and announced Mahender Singh was not there. He had gone to a wedding in a village about twenty-four miles away, riding in his oxcart. It was uncertain when he would return. His servant was not there either. He was in jail arrested in connection with a milkmen's brawl that had taken place recently, over some land. The police were arresting everybody they could find. Everybody else had fled. Bhutta said Mahender Singh had probably used the wedding as an excuse to absent himself too. The name of the grasscutter was Bhagiya. He was not employed by Mahender Singh but he was keeping an eye on the shack for him at the moment. He had assured Bhutta that if the gentleman required anything he was able to do for him he would be glad to do it. Bhutta had another alarming piece of news. Bhagiya told him a party of hunters had arrived early in the morning. Bhuvan Shome was disconcerted and discouraged. He felt like paying his respects to the holy Ganges and turning back from where he was. But the buffaloes were gone. How could he go back?

How long will it take you to find the runaway

buffaloes and bring them here?" he asked.

"There's no telling. Who knows where they've gone? I'll have to look for them."

"Bring them as quickly as you can. I'll wait here. While you're gone I'll see if I can find anything to shoot."

Bhutta was a good boy. Bhuvan Shome knew it. Before he left he drew water from the well and filled a pot for him. Bamboos erected beside the well held a pulley. There was an iron pot on a rope. Bhutta said he would tether the buffaloes at the house of Bhaggu Moral, a little to the West of the big silk cotton tree. It was not safe to bring them here, into the bihoniya's territory. The silk cotton tree marked the boundary. Then he would come back for him. He added something very interesting to Bhuvan Shome. He said the first buffalo had known instinctively when he entered the forbidden area, thrown off his yoke and galloped away to safety. Bihoniyas mark the boundaries of their beats with their dung. Any buffalo entering the area is warned by the dung or its smell. If they go on, a clash is inevitable. Bhuvan Shome was once again astonished at the number of things he did not know.

Before Bhutta left him he took out his lunch and tried to eat it but he rolled his eyes in alarm when he saw what Anil had given him. An omlette and mango chutney! Both are unlucky on a journey. Now he understood why he was having so much trouble. He ate a few litchie and several pieces of *sandesh*. It was one thing less to do. He

was not particularly hungry. And how far was he going to drag that tiffin carrier? Would it be safe to leave it here? How honest was Bhagiya? He was probably not at all reliable. Bhutta washed the tiffin carrier, filled his water flask for him and turned to go. The flask seemed a botheration to Bhuvan Shome. He would not get very thirsty in this season. It was cool. And the river was nearby. He gave Bhutta both the flask and the tiffin carrier.

Bhuvan Shome lit his pipe. Bhutta was gone. Colours were playing in the Eastern sky, rising and spreading. It was a beautiful sight. Bhuvan Shome exclaimed appreciatively as he watched. Clouds rose steeply, piling upon one another, adding to the play of light as the sun prepared to rise above the horizon. The clouds were blocking its way. But who could stop it? Bhuvan sat back and enjoyed the spectacle, puffing contentedly at his pipe. The red disc started up at the point where the green fields abutted on the sky. The trees along the edge were black, as though drawn in ink. Red. All shades of red. Where the red ended the blue began, a shining translucent blue.

Bhuvan Shome had loved to paint at one time. The changing colours enchanted him. One ran into the other without any disharmony, blending and flowing rhythmically.

He remembered Brown, the railway guard who had taught him. Brown, when he was very drunk, sometimes said things that were memorable. Once he waved his hands in Shome's face and cried, "You

don't have to go to church to find God if you understand colour deeply enough. You'll find God in colour, in the colours of the earth and sky. You don't have to go to a temple. Colour is God, Brahma, if you see it right." Bhuvan Shome was a Hindu. He had heard Brahma is Sound. From Brown he learned that he is also Colour. Brown rose before him in his imagination. He saw him very clearly. His large blue eyes were watery. They always seemed heavy with tears. There were pouches under his eyes. His hair were silky and fine, rousled. His age showed in his cheeks. They were covered with fine veins, red. His eyes protruded and he always stared at whatever he looked at. In his lower lids the tears collected. He gestured when he talked, his fingers shook. The first and second fingers of his right hand were discoloured, stained yellow by cigarettes. Brown had said colour is God, Brahma.

Shome remembered his grand-daughter, Reba. Reba sang well. Once she had sung one of Tagore's songs for him. The words ran : *sabar range rang mishate habe Ogo amar priya, tomar rangin uttariya par par tabe*— "That's nonsense," Bhuvan Shome said aloud suddenly, "colour cannot be bleaded into the colour of all." The thought of Reba continued to bother him. He had not had any news for a long time. Not a single letter. Why should they write ? They did not need him any more. He remembered that one of Reba's eyes had been ruined by small pox. The poor girl, blind in one eye, would not find a husband to look after her. That

had been the reason her parents had decided to let her study music. They hoped it would be a help to her. Bhuvan Shome knew better. It wouldn't help. A woman's best friend is a man; a man's best friend is a woman. There is no substitute. Any other arrangement makes confusion worse confounded. That was why even a man like Vidyasagar advocated marriage for widows.

Bhuvan Shome stopped suddenly. The sound of a gun. Twice. He looked as though lightning had struck him.

"E-e-e- they'll send all the birds flying—"

He picked up his own gun and hurried forward, going first to Bhagiya, to ask him the way to the sandbank. The boy did not answer. Was he deaf? Shome had asked his question in Bengali. He repeated it in Hindi.

"How can I reach the river? Where is the road?"

Bhagiya went on cutting grass in silence. He ignored Shome's presence completely.

"What's the matter with you? Why don't you answer me?"

Bhagiya raised his head and looked at him. He said nothing.

"Now then. Listen to me, will you? How can I get to the river bank? Where is the road?"

"There isn't any road."

No road? What was the boy saying? He repeated the question. Bhagiya was silent. How aggravating the boy was! Bhuvan Shome was stubborn himself. He plied Bhagiya with questions, one after the other.

The answer the boy at last vouchsafed in his pidgin speech made it clear there was no road to the river bank from this place. The only way to get there was to cross through the pea fields. Fields of wheat and barley lay beyond. He would come to another field of peas after passing through them. He would have to walk on the narrow ridges dividing one field from another. The river bank was beyond that. If he inadvertently stepped off the ridges and trod down the grain the owner of the fields, Bhikhan Gop, would be after him with a heavy cane. He hid in a shack in the corner of one of the fields, keeping watch like a hawk. If the gentleman wished to take the road he would have to go back to the silk cotton tree where the bihoniya attacked him. After he had followed the road in an easterly direction for some distance he would come to a mango tree, a mango tree in bud, on the right... The mango trees were covered with thick buds this year. The road to the river ran past this tree.

Bbuvan Shome was amazed.

Bhutta had left him here, in a place like this? It was a labyrinth. "Uff!" he exclaimed and fell silent. The next instant he started attributing his helplessness to the fact he belonged to the gentry. These people in the fields are coming to the top now. They can behave just as they like. The gentry have to put up with their lack of manners. He'd have to go on, since he had come this far, he'd have to reach the river bank. Persuasion might work with Bhagiya. He would try it. He cast about for a way to deal with him. The vicious centipede! At

last he murmured a prayer to all the gods of the *kali Yug*.

"Will you show me the way to the riverbank?" he asked in very elementary Bengali, "I'll reward you well. Take this in advance."

Bhuvan Shome took his wallet out of his pocket and extracted a two-anna coin. Bhagiya picked the coin up off the ground and stuck it into his ear. The square coin fitted it snugly. Bhuvan Shome noticed the boy had a countrymade cigarette behind his ear too. But Bhagiya made no move to get up. He continued cutting grass just as before.

"What's the matter, boy? Don't you like two annas? Take another coin. Now come on and get up. Take me to the river, boy."

Bhuvan Shome took out his wallet again, found another two-anna coin and gave it to him. It was at once snugly deposited in the boy's other ear. But Bhagiya continued to cut grass just as before. Bhuvan Shome was shaking with rage. He knew it would spoil everything if he lost his self-control and betrayed his anger. He waited in silence for a minute or two.

His silence had an effect. Bhagiya tied the grass he had cut into a bundle and jumped up and down on it several times. Then he retied it more compactly and stuck his scythe into one side. What he did next was altogether dramatic. He held out his hand to Bhuvan Shome. There was a five rupee note in it. In his pidgin speech he explained the note had fallen to the ground when Shome had opened his wallet to take out the two anna coin. He

had hidden the note in the grass to watch the fun. What would Bhuvan Shome do? He batted his eyes as he spoke but there was no trace of a smile on his face. Lifting the huge bundle of grass lightly he set it on his head and started towards the shack without another word.

Bhuvan Shome was astonished at what the boy had done. He could not speak and followed Bhagiya in silence.

Bhagiya put the bundle of grass into one of the rooms in the shack, fastened the chain on the door and turned to him.

"Let's go now, Babu," he said.

Bhuvan Shome was pleased. The boy had finished the work he was doing before starting anything else. Not even the coins had been able to divert his attention. Apparently money held little attraction for him. Would he have returned the five rupee note if it had? For Bhuvan Shome this was a new experience. He had never seen anything like it before. He remembered his greedy nephew, Hanu.

Bhagiya returned to the ground where he had been cutting grass. Looking back at Bhuvan Shome he rushed into the pea field. Bhuvan Shome could not move as lightly and quickly as Bhagiya but he followed him as fast as he could. He found it difficult to enter the field. The gun on his shoulder got caught in the bushes. The bushes were thick and high. He unslung his gun and carried it in front of him, in his hands. He pushed his way in with difficulty. Once inside Bhagiya was nowhere to be seen. Where had the boy got to?

"Bhagiya, where are you?" he called.

"Here. Over on this side."

Bhuvan Shome made his way in the direction indicated. His gun caught in the bushes again and again. His hat fell off. At last he tucked his hat under his arm.

"Bhagiya..."

"Here. Over here."

Bhagiya was standing in a bare patch of ground at the centre of the field. He was surprised. The patch was fenced round by high thick pea bushes. It was larger than it appeared at first sight. A shack stood on one side. He looked at Bhagiya questioningly. The boy explained this field was his and he lived in the shack to keep an eye on the crop. Yes, he said, he stayed there at night too. Bhuvan Shome looked around. Bhagiya was evidently a person of some discrimination. He had a pet—a young wild rabbit in a roughly constructed cage. Bhagiya now stuffed handfuls of grass he plucked from the edge of the clearing into it. When that was done he turned back to Shome.

"Now let's go." he said.

"Where did you get the rabbit?"

Bhagiya related proudly how he had caught it himself, in a wild chase.

"Doesn't it eat anything but grass?"

"And milk. And chick peas."

Bhagiya did not want to waste time talking. He re-entered the field, passing through the bushes as easily as if he were in his own house. Bhuvan Shome could not move like that over the concrete floors of

his elaborately built town house. The boy was more like a rabbit than a man. He was going forward almost at a run. Bhuvan Shome had to quicken his gait in order to keep up with him. It was difficult. The pea bushes were almost impenetrable.

It took them about five minutes to cross through the field and come out into plantations of wheat and barley. These were extensive too. There was a shack on one side and in the shack sat the owner, Bhikhan Gop, of whom Bhagiya had spoken earlier. He was really fierce-looking. Thick black curly hair covered his head too. His face was completely hidden by his heavy black moustache and beard. Only his eyes were visible. Even his nostrils were hidden. His hair and beard were long, matted, extraordinary. Bhuvan Shome, remembering Bhagiya's instructions, advanced carefully along the narrow ridges that threaded the fields. Then something wholly unexpected occurred. Bhikhan Gop darted out of his shack suddenly, approached Shome and bowed, making an elaborate salaam. Then he smiled diffidently. Bhuvan Shome saw that a small gold dot had been set in each of his front teeth, in the centre. The man was fastidious.

Bhuvan Shome had expected Bhikhan Gop to be furious if he emerged from his shack at all and was afraid of being beaten up. The man's polite manner aroused his curiosity. He attributed it to his European clothes. Bhagiya was delighted to see Bhikhan in such an amiable mood. In their local patois he explained to him the purpose of Shome's visit, taking the credit for it himself. Bhikhan Gop seemed

pleased. He said there was a boat at the landing, his own boat, and he would feel honoured if the saheb could make use of it.

"Is there a boatman?"

"Bhagiya can row it."

"Does Bhagiya know how to handle a boat?"

Bhagiya nodded, a little too vigorously.

It was difficult for Shome to walk along the narrow ridges. Bhikhan noticed it and did what he had never before been known to do.

"Walk across the fields," he said, "it won't matter if you tread on a stick or two. One or two plants more or less doesn't make much difference."

Bhagiya was dumbfounded. He had never heard anything like that. He had not thought it possible.

After the fields of wheat and barley another field of peas had to be crossed but it was not large. To get through it was not much of a hardship. When they came out on the other side they saw water. It was not the main channel of the Ganges.

Flood water had been trapped behind the sand dunes at the end of the previous monsoon and had not yet dried up. Wag-tails rose in a cloud as they walked toward it. The birds resettled a short distance away wagging their tails energetically. Bhuvan Shome was surprised to see some yellow birds among them. He had never seen yellow wagtails before and watched them for a long time. They were strangely beautiful.

"Those are dhobins."

"Are they? They're wagtails."

"No, Dhobins."

Bhuvan Shome concluded the local name for wag-tails must be dhobin.

"Where's the boat?"

"Just ahead."

The sun had risen by the time they reached the main channel of the river, trudging over the dunes. They were high.

The sound of a gun came again followed by honking of geese and quacking of ducks. He saw birds rise into the air. They were quite far away.

"The sahebs have come in a motor boat."

Who were they? A magistrate's party? A minister's? The people who had made Mahatma Gandhi the father of the country?

He watched the flying birds. How many could they kill? Not more than a dozen or two. But they had succeeded in frightening the birds away.

The motor boat came into sight. It was edging along the opposite shore, keeping close in.

"The sahebs won't come this side—"

Bhuvan Shome's boat was not far away. He hesitated at first wondering whether to get into it or not. Ought he to reply entirely upon Bhagiya? Bhagiya divined what he was thinking. He declared he would tow the boat along the bank. There was no reason to be alarmed. They'd find plenty of duck a little further on.

At last he got in, murmuring a prayer to the goddess Durga. The boat rocked violently. He had never hunted from a boat before. He had always been on firm ground, with something solid under his feet. Would he be able to aim at any-

thing, standing in a wobbly boat? It is best to stick to one's own *dharma*. The proverb is undoubtedly true. To do anything else is to invite disaster.

He remembered the padre, Father Tailor Bird.

Father Tailor Bird had taught him the proverb and explained its meaning.

Bhagiya was walking along the shore, dragging the tow line. The boat moved forward slowly. Bhuvan Shome thought of the padre.

The rays of the sun touched the tops of the ripples in the water, turning them to gold. As he gazed at them Bhuvan Shome saw Father Tailor Bird once more. He lit a cigar.

Father Tailor Bird was ugly. Short, dark, bearded. There were streaks of grey in his beard. He wore a cassock and a clerical hat. The padre had helped him immensely. It had been Father Tailor Bird who persuaded Rev. Fergusson to write a letter to the Railway Agent recommending Shome. He had been given a double promotion. Who could stand in his way when the Agent took a personal interest in him? The Britishers were gods in those days. They could, if they chose, help a lame man cross a mountain. Shome was profoundly grateful to Father Tailor Bird. The manner of their meeting had been unusual and their acquaintance brief. They saw each other for the first time in a railway waiting room. Later Father Tailor Bird had come to his house. The good padre said he had been to see a sick villager. The train was not due for some time yet. He dropped in to see Shome too. It was a Sunday. Shome discovered

in the course of their conversation, that the padre had not eaten anything. He asked if there was a hotel anywhere around. "Kellner's is very expensive," he said, "I prefer a cheaper eating house."

Bhuvan Shome invited him to share his lunch. At first Father Tailor Bird had been very reluctant. It was only after a great deal of persuasion that he consented.

"Bring me something then," he said at length, "you can serve me here, on the porch, on a banana leaf plate. Having a Christian for a meal makes a lot of trouble for Hindus."

"What a thing to say?" Shome had protested, "we'll sit down together. We're not as orthodox as all that. To us a guest is like a divinity."

Father Tailor Bird had been pleased. The food was simple. No fuss was made. They had not even had fish that day. None had been brought from the market. After lunch Father Tailor Bird had rested quietly on the porch for a long time. Then he said, "I remember so many things!"

"For instance?" Bhuvan Shome had asked encouragingly.

"My life," the padre had answered, "I'm the son of a Kulin Brahmin of untainted lineage. Can you believe it? People used to crowd to our house for the leavings of my father's sacrifices and a few drops of the water in which his feet were washed."

Bhuvan Shome had been surprised. He thought people of low caste were the ones who became converts to Christianity, often in the hope of obtaining employment denied to them otherwise. Why had

Brahmin changed his religion? Had he fallen in love or something? He asked the padre. The story the padre told him in reply to his question astonished him even more. He remembered every detail. It would make a good novel if anybody were to write it up.

Father Tailor Bird said that, as a boy, he had been invited to the wedding of one his friends. The bridegroom was from his village and lived in the same neighborhood. He was a member of the bridegroom's party. The wedding guests set out by oxcart. The summer was at its height, the heat intense, for it was late in May.

They had not travelled far when Father Tailor Bird had begun to feel sick. He vomited. He did not know whether it was the heat that brought it on or not. He vomited again a little farther on and was also seized with severe abdominal pains and diarrhoea. He passed several watery stools. Everybody assumed he was stricken with cholera. They did not doubt it. A man with cholera is a poor wedding guest. He was set down beneath a tree and left there. Nobody stayed with him. Somebody might have done that. If anybody had, his life might have taken a different turn altogether. But nobody did. In the fierce heat of a midsummer noon he lay beneath a tree in a deserted spot and tossed and turned in agony. He was dying of thirst. Who was to give him little water?

After a time he lost consciousness. He had no idea how long he lay there. He was dimly aware of being picked up and carried on a man's shoulder. Who had taken him on his shoulder? He was covered with

excreta and vomit. Was it one of Yama's messenger? At last he realised, little by little, that he had been picked up by an emissary of God, not a denizan of hell. He was a tall, strong white man, a Christian missionary. He carried him to a hospital, cleansed him, cared for him, made arrangements for his treatment. In short, he gave him a new life. He felt reborn. When he was well again he did not return home. Instead he accepted the Christian religion and dedicated himself to the propagation of its teachings. For the past twenty years he had been preaching the message of Christ, walking from village to village on foot, meeting and talking to thousands of men and women. And he had been highly successful. Many became converts.

After finishing his story the padre was silent for a long time gazing up into the sky. He rocked his legs slowly back and forth. Then he turned to Bhuvan Shome and said something that changed the whole colouring of his mind permanently. In his heart he had looked down on Father Tailor Bird although he kept his manner polite and kindly. He had little respect for Indian Christians in spite of the teaching of Swami Vivekananda and Ramakrishna. But what Father Tailor Bird said startled him out of his complacency.

"Tell me," the padre asked, "if I perform the prescribed purificatory rites and become a Hindu again, will you accept me?"

"Why do you ask that?" Bhuvan Shome wanted to know.

The padre did not answer immediately. He ran

his fingers through his beard before he said, "I'm asking it because I know now that I made a mistake. The people who abandoned me under the tree were ignorant, cowardly, superstitious but they were not mean. They were not to blame for what they did. Their actions were the result of their long subjugation. The British did not want us to become anything more than serviles, clerks, good subordinates. They did not want real men. They tried to educate us into permanent slavery.

I got to know them very well after I became a Christian. I know how they regard us, The equality of which they boast so much is only lip deep. They help us in order to convert us and teach us Western ways. But in their hearts they look down on us. To them we are not human. Their meanness has amazed me. They refuse us a place in their graveyards even after we are dead. Every Indian is inferior, no matter how learned he may be, how wise, how able. I would have been a bishop by now if the work I have done for them counted for anything. But the colour of my skin is brown. The exceptions are so few they don't count. The people of this country are what they are because of their long enslavement and the ignorance in which they have been kept. The Christians are proud and sensitive about their civilisation but you cannot imagine how base they can be in their dealings with us. If I had worked one fourth as hard to dispell the ignorance in which our people live as I have to preach Christianity I would have achieved more, done better. That's what I feel

now. Of course facilities do not exist. Conditions are not favourable for any enterprise of that kind. Well-wishers of the country are put in jail, exiled, sent to the gallows. But the country will be free. Sooner or later a day will come when it will be free. That's why I was wondering if, now——"

Father Tailor Bird stopped speaking. Bhuvan Shome noticed tears in the corners of his eyes. He was on the point of saying something in defence of the British but the sight of the padre's tears made him restrain himself. A month or so after Father Tailor Bird's visit he was promoted, quite unexpectedly. He made enquiries. The Agent had passed confidential orders. The Agent's sudden interest in him was a mystery. Then one day a Santhal arrived, carrying a basket of mangoes and a letter. The letter was from Rev. Ferguson.

"We are grateful to you," he wrote, "for your kindness to Father Antonio Ghosal. The padre wanted to send you some mangoes. He would have taken them to you himself if he had been able to. Unfortunately he died, some days ago, of a stroke. I happened to know of his intention. The mangoes are therefore being sent to you now, through John Kachchap. It will please me very much if you accept them."

The mangoes were not very good ones. They were mountain mangoes with large seeds and little flesh, rather tart. But Bhuvan Shome was pleased with the warmth of Father Tailor Bird's heart. Antonio Ghosal had been known as the tailor bird priest to the entire countryside because of his

diminutive size. Then Bhuvan Shome heard Rev. Farguson was good friend of the Agent. The mystery of his promotion was solved. His thoughts of Father Tailor Bird were interrupted by Bhagiya.

"Birds. Birds. Big birds." he called, splashing into the water. Bhuvan Shome saw a dead duck float by. Bhagiya started swimming after it. The wild duck must have been hit by a bullet from the hunters in the motor boat and dropped into the water. They may not have seen it or they may not have been able to reach it. Bhagiya was swimming madly and Bhuvan rose to his feet in his excitement. He failed to notice at first something else that was happening. The boat was drifting swiftly away in the opposite direction. The current had caught it. What could he do! Bhuvan Shome tried to push it shoreward with the bamboo pole but he was clumsy, lost his footing and nearly fell into the river.

"O—o—h : Bhagiya, the boat's drifting "

There was no way of telling whether Bhagiya heard him or not. People of his type not infrequently act as though they're deaf even when they hear clearly. Bhagiya did not so much as turn his head. He was after the wild duck and kept straight on, swimming as fast as he could. Bhuvan Shome was nearly in the middle of the river. The wind was growing stronger.

"O—o—h! Bhagiya : Bhagiya-a-a."

Bhagiya did not look back. He kept straight on. Bhuvan Shome was really frightened. The boat drifted swiftly into midriver. Why had he

taken this boat ? What a mess he had got himself into ! Was he going to die like this ? Suddenly his attention was caught by something else. Water was rising in the boat's bottom. His danger was doubled. He found a bowl used for baling water in the boat and started dipping the water out without more ado. He remembered Robinson Crusoe. What on earth was Bhagiya doing ? He looked round to see. No, he showed no sign of turning back. The boat was moving faster, settling lower into the water.

"O—o—h ! Bhagiya !"

Bhagiya kept right on after the duck. There. He had it. He was turning back. He raised his arm and waved the duck to show Shome he had it. The boat had picked up speed. God alone knew where it would touch shore. There was nothing for Shome to do but bale water, bale for his life. His expensive woolen trousers were caked with mud. Suleiman would charge him at least Rs 5/- to get them clean. The fellow salaamed and salammmed but refused to reduce his bill a pice. Shome baled.

"The boat's drifting. Catch it. Catch it." Bhagiya called as he swam in the boat's direction. He repeated the call several times. Apparently he was speaking to somebody. Was any human being to be found in this barren countryside ? There was. A number of strong young men appeared on the deserted sandbank, running. They must have been working in the fields on the other side. Bhagiya saw them and raised his voice. Four of

them jumped straight into the river and started swimming. The boat 'had drifted so far it took them more than fifteen minutes to reach it. Bhagiya also came up, carrying the dead duck.

Bhuvan Shome saw the bird was a large pintail. He was very angry. "Didn't you hear me shouting?" he demanded.

Bhagiya hung his head. Yes, he had heard.

"Then why didn't you come?"

Bhagiya was surprised. How could he come without the duck? He had left the boat to get the duck. And he added an expression that showed very plainly he felt he was being blamed for doing something he had been ordered to do.

"I don't want that duck," declared Bhuvan Shome, "I'll do my own hunting. You can have it."

Bhagiya's face withered. He had hoped for a reward.

"Come on," said one of the men, "let's eat."

Bhagiya put the duck down on one of the struts.

"Put it on the floor," the man said, showing him where, "or a hawk will get it."

Bhagiya did not give the bird another glance. He dragged dispiritedly at the line. He had been hurt by Bhuvan Shome's attitude.

"What kind of a hawk?" Shome asked. The men explained a large hawk something like a falcon was common in these parts. The hawks often follow hunters, swooping down on the birds that were hit. One of the men picked the bird up and put it inside the covered part of the boat. The boat

had oars. The men began to row.

“Where shall we take you, Babu?” they asked.

Bhuvan Shome said he had had enough of the boat. He wanted to get out.

They set him down on a sandy beach and rowed away. Bhuvan Shome began to walk.

Five

Bhuvan Shome had no idea how long he walked. He followed the shore, walking beside the river. Sand dunes were all around him. The dunes were high, rising and falling. In places they were like hills or large knolls. Short stretches of flat land separated them. They blocked his view entirely. Nothing could be seen beyond them. The walking refreshed him. He began to feel younger. He climbed to the tops of the dunes eagerly and with ease. From there he looked around, scanning the countryside for birds. He saw none. Neither were any birds to be heard. The motor boat had wrought havoc. He climbed one ridge after another only to come down again disappointed. Shome walked on.

The sandbank was not entirely devoid of trees. There were a few scattered here and there, mostly casuarinas. Shome noticed a small brown bird in one, a bird about the size of a sparrow but with a long tail. It seemed to find the tail difficult to manage. The bird was calling continuously and

its call was very sweet. It kept flitting from tree to tree, apparently unable to settle anywhere for long. Bhuvan Shome did not know its name. At first he thought it was a fork-tailed shrike drongo but a close look showed him it was some other bird. If the gentleman with the binoculars had been there he would surely have known at least the Latin name. Bhuvan Shome noticed the large number of crows on this deserted sandbank. There were also lots of mynahs, blue jays, drongos stone curlew. A chicken hawk was wheeling in the sky some distance away. He saw three or four kinds of kingfishers. One was so tiny it looked like a butterfly. He was enchanted. He noticed several pairs of sheldrake. They were birds with which he was very familiar. He had shot one once but nobody had been able to eat. The meat had a fishy taste. The birds were handsome creatures.

They'd turn their heads and look back if anybody followed them, rising into the air with a loud konking cry. They'd alight again a short distance away. Bhuvan Shome began to wonder where the birds he was looking for were. He realised he had not seen a single duck. Would he have to go back empty-handed? What could he say to Anil? He'd have to take a bird back with him. A little further on he was sure to find ducks. And if he didn't he would go somewhere else. Anil had told him there was a village on the sandbank. He glanced at his wrist-watch. It was nearly eight o'clock. Ducks would be scarce so late in the morning. The other hunters had scared them away very early. But they

would have to settle sooner or later. How long would they keep in the air? He walked faster, bending his head with determination. The sand had begun to shimmer in the sun.

A little farther on he saw several broken pots and a tattered string cot lying on the beach, close to the water. He went closer. Pieces of charcoal were scattered about. A cremation had taken place here very recently.

His father's death. Suddenly he remembered. His mother's death. The death of his wife. The deaths of his nephews, Bīrinchilal and Jagganath. He had strewn the ashes of each of them on the waters of the Ganges himself, with his own hands. The last rites had been performed punctiliously, down to the smallest detail, for all of them. It would not be long now before his time came. Who would carry his ashes to the Ganges? There was no one in the house any longer. Perhaps the neighbourhood cremation committee would see to it. Nimai, so sickly, always afflicted, with diarrhoea, chronic, ill-tempered Sridam, fat Bhombal, Haren the opium-addict, drunken Fatik. Bhuvan Shome saw them all. Their faces appeared distinctly to his mind's eye. His last journey would be on their shoulders. Would Nipu come? He had left the world. He was a monk. Bilu would not come. He had been abroad and was too occupied with his own importance. They would not come. They would not come. Nobody, he thought, would come. Nobody would give a second thought to him. Better luck next time. When he was born again. Bhuvan

Shome muttered to himself for a long time. Then he walked on.

A day or two before he died Birinchi had asked for rasagollas. Bhuvan Shome had not given them to him. Instead he had scolded the boy. It seemed to him now he had done wrong. What harm would it have done to let the poor fellow have the rasagollas? He would have died anyway. Dr. Chandan gave his permission but Bhuvan Shome withheld them.

Bhuvan Shome's step was slower. He walked on absentmindedly. After what seemed to him a long time he heard the cries of birds. He looked up. Parakeets went screeching through the sky. The flock wheeled and flew off with raucous mockery. They were not river birds. Had they come, like Bhuvan Shome, for an outing?

Once he stopped and stood still. How long was he going to keep on like this? What else could he do? He could not go back today without a duck. The ducks had been badly scared but they would come down somewhere again and he would find them. He had to.

He walked on. His feet were hurting but he kept going. There was an exceptionally high dune in front of him. He could see nothing beyond it. Laboriously he climbed to the top. From the top he looked around. A man with a fishing rod was sitting by the river. He was quite close.

When he descended the dune and drew closer to the man he saw he was sitting with his head between his knees. He had never seen longer thighs. The man looked headless from a distance.

"Have you seen any ducks around here? Do you know where I can find some?" Bhuvan Shome asked in his lame Hindi.

The man did not appear to hear him. He repeated the question more loudly. The man's face, when he lifted his head from his knees, was the face of a good man. He was somewhat put out. When the man answered his question in excellent Bengali his surprise was complete.

"A little farther on you'll come to a small village. There is a bend in the Ganges just beyond it. Lots of birds are there. I saw them just a little while ago."

"Are you a Bengali?"

"Yes, sir. Our ancestral home is in Hoogly district, in the village of Seyakhala. My grandfather migrated to Babhum. That's where we live now, near Dubrajpur."

The man was talkative. Bhuvan Shome questioned him :

"What are you doing here?"

"I teach in the minor school. It's about four miles from here. It's not a good job but the climate is healthy. That's the reason I stay. I have chronic dyspepsia——"

"Shall I go straight on?"

"Yes, straight ahead. It won't be long before you see the village. The villagers are good people."

Bhuvan Shome did not waste any more time. The news about the birds had revived his flagging enthusiasm. He walked briskly until he came to the village. It consisted of three or four small thatched

huts. Smoke was rising. A girl was gathering cowdung. But he halted abruptly when he got nearer. Several buffaloes were wandering about, keeping them at a safe distance he approached by a rather roundabout route.

Bhuvan Shome was feeling tired. He wanted to rest a little before setting out in search of the birds again. But it was an unlucky day for him. He was almost in the village when somebody cried out, "Run, Babu! Run! Fast. Fast." He looked around. A water buffalo was snorting and pawing the ground, on the point of charging him. The bihoniya! The very same bihoniya! What a catastrophe! He ran as hard as he could. How could he beat the buffalo? He was within an inch of ending his life on the Buffalo's horns when the girl gathering cowdung called out, "Oh, Subodh! Stop it." The buffalo stopped in his tracks. Her voice acted like a charm.

Bhuvan Shome was panting. The girl came up, took the buffalo by his ears and scolded, "Naughty again, are you? Aren't you ashamed? You got a good beating a little while ago, didn't you?"

The buffalo took her scolding with his head down. Then he looked up, eyeing Bhuvan Shome once more. He was still furious. Shome noticed a rag tied around his head, just beneath the horns. He had not seen it before. He concluded the beast had gored somebody and that the rag was all that remained of his clothes.

Then he realised the girl was speaking Bengali. That surprised him. Was she the schoolmaster's daughter? Gathering dung?

The buffalo had started to edge towards him again. "Stop it, Subodh," the girl intervened, "No more of that now."

The buffalo stopped, waving its tail.

"Come here. I've got to tie you up. You're getting too bad, you know." The girl jumped lightly on to the back of the beast. She moved as expertly as a skilled horsewoman.

Bhuvan Shome looked on in amazement. The name of this devil appeared to be Subodh, the Good. What a girl! He had read in the Chandi about the goddess Mahishmardini, Buffalo Slayer, but he had never seen a woman like that before.

He watched. The girl stretched herself on the buffalo's back and put her arms around his neck. The beast rocked gently on his haunches as he docily carried her into the village. What a feat!

Bhuvan Shome was exhausted. He found a high spot close by, dragged himself to it and sat down. Had he sat out on this hunting excursion at a particularly inauspicious hour? Eggs are really unlucky. Very unlucky. He had taken eggs with him when he went to Rajmahal and his luck had been bad there too. If he had known Anil was going to give him eggs he would have asked him not to. Nowadays boys don't care about such things, they don't even know. The omlette stirred uneasily in his stomach. Until it had been thoroughly digested he would have no respite from misfortune.

He gazed at the river. A kingfisher was darting over the water. After he had watched the flowing current for some time Shome began to feel a little

better. It soothed him. He felt less tired.

"Please sit here."

Bhuvan Shome turned round. An old man, tall as a forest tree was beckoning to him politely with his long strong arm. His beard made him look like Michael Madhusudan Dutta. The upper part of his body was bare. A straight narrow strip of cloth twisted about his hips covered him from his waist to his knees. The sacred thread he wore was soiled. Bhuvan Shome had not noticed when the old man fetched a string cot, set it down near the knoll and covered it with a red bedspread.

"Please take your seat here, on the cot," the old man repeated

From the way he spoke and his manner Bhuvan Shome concluded he might belong to the gentry. When he stood up the old man greeted him with folded hands and Shome returned the greeting.

"What is your name?" Shome asked.

"Chaturbhuj Gop "

Then he was a milkman. A milkman with a sacred thread? Of course everybody wore sacred threads nowadays. That was probably why young Brahmins were discarding them. Such strange things were happening.

"I've come to hunt," he said, seating himself on the cot. He spoke in Bengali. "I'm told lots of ducks are near here."

"Yes, lots, but —"

"But what?"

"Beyond Nolakishore's field. To the East. Straight—" he raised an arm and pointed.

Bhuvan Shome rose. It was late, very late, already. He did not want to delay any longer. He felt he should go on at once and see what he could find when he had been given directions. News of the birds made him forget how tired he was. Chaturbhuj Gop explained, in the local pidgin, that he should rest before setting out again. He was welcome to rest on the string cot. The birds would be there the whole day. Bhuvan Shome lit a cigar, slung his gun over his shoulder and started on his way. He politely declined the invitation.

The path ran through the centre of the village. He followed it. The bihoniya was chained to a strong stake. The beast was lying down. At the sight of Shome it rose to its feet angrily and glared at him with eyes red with fury. Bhuvan Shome hurried on. The dunes beyond the village ran downhill quite steeply. The descent was easy. There was a green field at the bottom. It was probably Nolakishore's. The ducks were near it, Chaturbhuj Gop had said. He pressed forward eagerly. There were some people in the middle of the field. Some were cutting grass. Others were pulling up plants by the roots.

"Are there any birds over there?"

"Yes, Babu, Go a little further."

Bhuvan Shome was curious. What were they uprooting? In answer to his question the men said they were digging up gram bushes. Why? The bushes were growing too thickly. They were thinning them out. The ones they were taking out would be eaten. They made good spinach. They

would be sold as well as eaten at home and fed to the cows and buffaloes. Another preparation is made from these plants. The unripe gram is roasted with the plant itself. • This is very tasty. It is called *ora*.

“Shall I go straight on?”

“Yes, Babu, but throw your cigar away. The birds will take to the air if you don’t.”

Bhuvan Shome had just lighted his cigar. He threw it away although only a small part of it had been consumed.

The path was narrow. He saw the bend in the river before he had gone far. He heard ducks calling. Mallards. Doting mallards. He hesitated, uncertain whether to go on or stay where he was. He saw the birds. Hundreds of them. Bhuvan Shome moved forward cautiously. He had to get them within range. He would not fire until he would see the birds’ feathers plainly. He loaded both barrels of his gun. Holding the gun behind him he advanced slowly. It seemed to him he had come a very long mile before he crouched down on his knees. Then he fired twice, in quick succession. The ducks cried out and flew up. Bhuvan Shome stood up, watching them keenly. Not a single bird dropped. He was most disappointed. Behind him somebody laughed aloud. He whirled around. It was the girl who had ridden the buffalo. She was laughing uncontrollably, pressing her veil over her mouth.

How ill-bred! Has nobody any manners any more? He remembered the way Gabu had laughed

when he had lost his footing while taking off his shirt collar. He had slapped him hard. Gabu was his nephew. He could not slap this girl. So he ignored her, staring at the disappearing ducks as though he had not heard her laughter. He pushed forward a little further. He would sit down and wait, hiding behind the bushes. The ducks would settle down again. Then he'd try again. He had to get at least one bird. How could he go back without one ?

"Listen."

He looked back. The girl had followed him.

"What ?"

She came up.

"Why are you shooting these harmless birds ? What harm have they done you ? The poor things--"

How impudent she was ! And she was smiling.

"Don't you eat meat ?"

"No."

"You eat vegetable, don't you ?"

"Yes, I do."

"What harm do vegetables do ? Why do you cut the poor things up and make them into curries ? Vegetables are alive too. They feel it when they're cut."

"Really ? I didn't know that. Are vegetables and birds the same ?" the girl twisted her dress around her finger." "No blood comes out when a vegetable is cut, vegetables don't cry when they're hurt. When birds are killed they bleed and cry."

She pressed her under lip against the upper one

as though she had proved something irrefutably.

"How wild she is!" Shome thought to himself.

"You like duck meat, don't you? You must be very fond of it." The girl had another question.

"At one time I did I don't eat ducks any more."

"Then why do you hunt them?"

Bhuvan Shome had no good answer ready. He walked on without a word. But the girl was stubborn. She followed him.

"Why shoot the poor things when you don't eat them? Let them go."

"I have to shoot at least one today. If I don't I'll lose my bet."

"Oh. You've made a bet, have you?"

That appeared to be a good reason to her. For some time she said nothing. "You'll never get a bird the way you're going about it," she said, "You'll lose your bet."

Bhuvan Shome was afraid he would.

"What can I do? Tell me."

"Will you do what I tell you to?"

"Tell me."

"Then come with me" Bhuvan Shome wondered whether to go with her or not. What did she know about hunting? Should he waste time with this impudent girl? He was sure to get himself into trouble of one kind or another. The omlette stirred in his stomach. That egg was not gone yet.

"Please come."

The girl was insistent. He'd have to go. He'd be late, that was all.

The girl led the way back to the village. Bhuvan Shome followed. Coming down the dune had not been difficult. Climbing back up was. He was breathing hard. The girl paid no attention to his plight. She leapt and ran. Now and then she looked back, shook the curly hair out of her face and smiled. Tagar had been like that. Very much like that. Shome remembered.

"Are you the teacher's daughter?" he asked

"Which teacher?"

"The teacher?"

"The teacher who is out fishing over there."

"No, why should I be! My father's name is Chaturbhuj Gop. He gave you a string cot to sit on."

How could the daughter of an ignorant rustic fellow like Chaturbhuj Gop speak Bengali so well? What was she saying?

"How did you learn Bengali?"

"My mother's brother lives at Pakur. I was brought up there. I studied it here too for sometime. The teacher who was fishing taught me. He's a little deaf but he's a good teacher."

Bhuvan Shome had no idea he was talking to the young wife of Sakhi Chand Jadav, the railway employee against whom he had drawn up a complaint. Her name was Bairdehi. He could not possibly have known.

"If you hadn't been here that buffalo would have finished me off today," he said, changing the subject. "He's very docile with you. He stopped as soon as you told him to."

"But of course, I've brought him up. When he was small he was very placid; he spent most of the time sleeping. That's why I named him Subodh, the Good. The older he gets the wilder he grows. Early this morning he got into a fight somewhere. His forehead is cut. I've put iodine on it and bandaged it."

Bhuvan Shome realised the cut on the buffalo's head had been inflicted by Bhutta's bamboo. He said nothing.

"Tincture of iodine will cure it, won't it?"

"Yes."

"Are you a Bengali?"

"Yes."

"Then why are you wearing European clothes?"

"These clothes are more convenient," he answered, thinking he was very impudent.

"Can you keep up with my father? Every morning at 3 a.m. he goes to Hansbari. He comes back for lunch. It's ten o'clock at night before he gets home. Hansbari is five miles from here."

"What does he go there for?"

"We have land there."

"He didn't go today?"

"No. Today there was work at home."

"Bidiya, O Bidiya!" some one was calling from a distance.

"That's my father," the girl said. "He sent me to see what had happened to you. Please don't complain about me. Tell him his Bidiya is a good girl. Will you?"

Bidiya ran on ahead without waiting for an answer.

Bhuvan Shome glanced up at the sky. No ducks were to be seen. They must have settled down somewhere. He noticed a tiny white cloud. It was floating around in the sky like a duck on a blue lake. He watched it for some time. Meanwhile one of the men working in the field said, "They'll be back in an hour or so. Now they've flown, they'll take time coming back."

Nosey fellows! thought Shome. Didn't Shome know he'd have to wait? Why was everybody hean into so nosey?

He went on towards the village. Then he saw Bidiya coming back.

"Why are you so slow? My father scolded me for nothing. He said I should have brought you in. Walk a little faster, will you?"

Bhuvan Shome hurried. Chaturbhuj Gop came out to greet him. He made him sit down on the string cot again. Then he said he had heard the gun. Haphazard firing like that was certain to drive the birds away. He wouldn't get any. Birds here, on this sandbank, have to be hunted in a different way.

Bhuvan Shome could have a good rest here and eat a little lunch. Afterwards Bidiya would show him what to do. She was very clever. Bidiya was young but she was intelligent for her age. She might not know manners, she did not know how to speak to people or how to conduct herself. She skipped about all day like a young heifer but she would learn in time.

Bidiya, from behind her father's back, made a sign.

"Your daughter is a good girl," said Bhuvan Shome, in broken Hindi. He had never told a bigger lie in his life.

Chaturbhuj's leonine face softened with pleasure. His eyes closed. For a while he was too overcome to speak. "The blessings of people like you—" he murmured.

"Bring some yogurt and flattened rice, girl," he said, turning to Bidiya, "Give the Babu something to eat."

Bhuvan Shome said he was not hungry, that he had eaten a short ago. He was alarmed.

"You've got to eat something," scolded Bidiya, "for my father's sake. He'd be deeply offended if a guest is allowed to leave without being served a meal. You must take a little as much as you can."

Bhuvan Shome looked at Chaturbhuj again. The tall old man, straight as a forest tree, was standing there with his hands pressed together in polite entreaty. He said nothing but his actions spoke louder than words. Bhuvan Shome acquiesced.

Bidiya brought him some sweet red rice, flattened, in a shining dish with a high rim.

"The goddess herself," Bhuvan Shome thought as he looked at her.

She brought yogurt in a clay bowl with a big cake of molasses beside it and half a dozen large ripe bananas.

Chaturbhuj was still there, watching her.

"Is there a shop somewhere near here?" Bhuvan Shome asked.

"No. These are all made at home."

"Fine. That's wonderful. Bring some for your father and we'll sit down together."

"He won't touch any food until you've finished yours."

Chaturbhuj nodded and smiled, indicating that what Bidiya said was correct. He was in transport, so pleased he was at the way this little girl of his conversed so fluently in Bengali with the elderly Bengali gentleman. He had lost the power of speech himself.

Bhuvan Shome ate what he could. Then Chaturbhuj Gop sat down, in front of him, and ate several seers of yogurt, half a pound of molasses, six or seven bananas and more than a pound of flattened rice. He drank a small pot of water and belched loudly at the end of his meal.

He washed his face and hands, wiped them on a thin towel and said the gentleman should rest on the string cot. Bidiya would make all the arrangements for his hunting in a little while. He had to go back to his fields.

After a heavy meal like that Chaturbhuj was going to walk five miles to his fields! Chaturbhuj amazed him. The milkman picked up a stout well-oiled bamboo, stuffed a pair of sandals made from buffalo leather into a bag, and set out. Before he left he assured Bhuvan Shome over and over again that everything would come right. He was not to worry.

"Lie down for a little," Bidiya said, "I have to go out but I'll be back soon."

"You didn't have anything to eat."

"I ate at 10 o'clock. It's a habit acquired in my school days."

Bidiya started kneading some cornflour in a small bowl.

"Who is that for?"

"For Shari. I don't know who'll look after Shari when I'm gone. It's a bother."

"Who is Shari? Your sister?"

"My sister? She's my tame mynah."

"Where is she?"

"Out in the fields now but she'll be back soon. She'll make a fuss if her food is not ready for her."

Bidiya fetched an empty cage. She put the small bowl inside it and hung it on the porch.

"See that palm tree over there. Come to this side. You can see it from here. Shari was born in that tree last April. One day she fell out of her nest and I found her at the foot of the tree. It was lucky for her I happened to pass that way. I brought her home and put her in that cage. She stayed there until she grew well and strong. I fed her cornflour mixed to a paste with water. Her mother brought her insects and other things. She began to make little excursions out of the cage as soon as she had feathers. That was a great relief to me. It was troublesome to keep watch over her all the time. But she came back to the cage the day after her first adventure. She fluffed her feathers and cocked her head, looking

at me as she said, "rea'dee-o, rea-dee-o! kik, kik, kik, rea-dee-o." That meant she wanted her cornflour. She comes for it, every day, without fail."

Bhuvan Shome was moved.

"When does she come? At what aime?"

"There's no fixed time. How can I sit and wait for her all day? I leave her food in the cage and go about my own work. When I come in I see that she has been here and eaten it all up like a good girl. She may not come while you are here. Lie down, will you? She wouldn't alight at all when my elder brother came. He had his camera with him and wanted to take her picture. Now lie down. Please. I have to dress Subodh's head again. Let's carry the cot into the house. You won't be able to sleep outside. The light is too strong. And Shari won't come. Take hold of it, will you? I can't carry it by myself."

Bhuvan Shome was not at all eager to enter the house but he had learned to obey Bidiya. She was much like Tagar, as stubborn as Tagar had been.

The string cot was brought in.

"Please rest quietly here for about an hour."

"I'm not in the habit of taking a nap in the daytime."

"I'll be back soon. Close your eyes for a while."

She went out, carrying a small bottle of iodine. What could he do? He lay down but got up again at once. Whose photograph was that? The face was vaguely familiar. He went up to it for

a close look. There now. It was a snapshot of Sakhi Chand Jadav! What was that rascal's picture doing here?

"Why aren't you lying down?" Bidiya had come back. "Subodh's head is bleeding again. He's been badly cut. Will iodine be enough?" I sent word to Dr. Bubbhut Babu of Baireya. He sent the iodine. Will that be enough?"

"Yes, but don't put too much on it at a time. Once a day is enough. I've heard a wound gets worse if it is applied too often. Now tell me. Whose photograph is this?"

Bidiya blushed and looked away.

"Nobody", she answered smiling shyly.

"Somebody" certainly. What relation is he to you?"

"My husband!" Bidiya fled, running out of the room.

Sakhi Chand Jadav was Bidiya's husband! What a strange coincidence! Bhavan Shome sat down on the cot. He was flabbergasted. Bidiya did not come back for nearly ten minutes. A bird began to call on the porch. "rea-dee-o, rea-dee-o, rea-dee-o, kik, kik, kik."

"Shari's come!" Bidiya whispered, entering silently by a door at the back. "Do you want to see her? Come."

The bird flicked its wings and flew away as soon as Shome appeared on the porch.

"You've frightened her!"

Shome re-entered the house. Bidiya accompanied him.

"I know your husband, Sakhi Chand Jadav," he said.

"You know him?"

"Yes. He's a rascal."

"He certainly is. He hasn't written. He used to write every single day. He wrote on pink letter paper, with a fountain pen. But how can I write every day myself? Tell me. The post office is four miles away. I have to use a lot of persuasion on Makkhu to get him to go once a week. How can I make him go every day——"

"Who is Makkhu?"

"Our cowherd. He takes the cows and buffaloes to pasture."

"Oh."

"Where did you meet him? How is it that you know him?"

"I work on the railways."

"Oh, do you? Do you know Shome Sahab? I'm told there's an officer named Shome Sahab on the railways. He goes around reporting against people. Has he reported against you? My husband says he has reported against him."

"No."

Bhuvan Shome was in an indescribable state.

"My husband writes that this fellow, Shome, is crazy. He dismissed his own son! He's just like my bihoniya, charging everything he sees." Bidiya laughed.

"He's a strict man. Very strict. Yes, Sakhi Chand took a bribe——"

"Why do you use the word bribe?" Bidiya

roared at him like a tigress, "Don't say that. Call it additional income. Income on the side. He helps travellers who are in trouble. They are gratified and give him a rupee or two to show it. What's wrong with that? This Shome fellow is vindictive and off his head. That's the truth. He can't stand anybody's good luck. He's envious. That's why he's submitted a report."

Bhuvan Shome thought it better to keep quiet.

"Do you know Bhuvan Shome?"

"Yes."

"Try to explain how it is to him, will you? I won't be allowed to join my husband if he loses his job."

"All right. I'll tell him."

Bhuvan Shome was feeling desperate. But he knew what he would have to do. He could not fail in his duty. Not for any reason whatsoever. The report would be sent in. Had he not, only the day before, loudly proclaimed to the young man on the streamer that he belonged to the old school? His motto was duty first and self last.

"Are you going to rest?"

"I can't sleep in the daytime."

"Then come on. Let me get everything ready for your hunting."

Bidiya brought some clothes. They were dirty and tattered.

"Put these on," she said, "Take those off."

"Those? Put those on? Why? What does this mean?"

"In these clothes you can get quite close to the

birds. The ones you're wearing will frighten them. They're accustomed to seeing people in clothes like these. They'll think you're just another field labourer. They won't be alarmed. Now listen to what I say. Load your gun. I'll take it and make my way to the fields keeping out of sight. The birds will not be surprised at me but the sight of the gun may warn them of danger. So I'll go as unobtrusively as possible. I'll get as close to the birds as I can. Then I'll signal to you. Now change your clothes. Make a turban with this red towel. Then follow me, carrying a bundle of cut gram on your head. You'll see. The birds won't fly away. You'll be able to win your bet. They'll think you're an ordinary field hand. How much did you bet? Will you give me a share of the money?"

Bidiya smiled.

"I haven't bet money. I've staked my honour. They think I can't bag a bird. I'm going to show them I can. Today."

"Have you ever been here before?"

"Not here. This is the first time I've come here. But I've been to Dilarpur, Bagharbil, Kataha, Fasiyatal. It would have been better for me not to have come here. That's how I feel now."

In the tone of voice a mother soothes a small child Bidiya reassured him.

"There's lots of ducks here too. You're sure to get some good shooting. Take your foreign clothes off. Load your gun and give it to me. I'll go ahead."

"I'll go with you. If you can make your way

unobserved I can too. Is there any need to change my clothes?"

"No, you can't. You're too tall for one thing. Do what I tell you."

"Those clothes are very dirty."

"Dirty clothes are best. The birds are not frightened at the sight of people in dirty clothes. They take fright at the sight of people in odd-looking clean clothes. There's another thing you can do. Can you pretend to be a tree and stand still like one? You'll have to stand still for a long time——"

"What do you mean?"

"I'll cut some branches and tie them on your arms, your back and your head. Casuarina branches. Your gun can be kept out of sight in the branches. From a distance you'll look just like a tree. Little by little you can edze forward, a step or two at a time. Slowly——"

Bidiya demonstrated how to do it.

"Don't shoot until you're close to the birds. If you approach them very slowly they'll think you're a tree and won't fly away. Take your choice."

"Is there any other way?"

"No. It might have been possible to do what the other hunters did this morning. But you don't have a motor boat. They set all the birds flying and fired when they were all in the air. Several of them fired at the same time. A few ducks were bound to drop into the water. How can you do that? You're all by yourself. There's no boat. You'd better do what I tell you to. You're sure to get a bird or two. It's the way the landowner's son, Chhabilal Babu,

hunts. I learned from him. He got a lot of birds when he dressed like a field hand and a tree."

Bhuvan Shome felt like giving up and going back but the thought of the way Anil, Kartik and Chhattu Sen would look at him made him hesitate. Particularly Anil. He couldn't go back without at least one duck. He had to decide.

"Dress as a field hand first. If that doesn't work try the tree trick. Load your gun and give it to me——"

Bhuvan Shome loaded the gun and handed it to Bidiya. He'd try his luck. His mind was made up. He set the lock on the gun. 'The girl was so quick in her movements, so restless. He could not risk an accident.

"I'm going ahead, through the pea field. Change and come behind me. I'll tell the men in Nolakishore's field to lend you a bundle of gram. You'll find me near the place where you fired the first time. I'll sit down where I find ducks and signal to you so you'll know where to go. Will that do?"

Bidiya went out. Bhuvan Shome took off his trousers and put on Makkhur's filthy garments. Uh! How smelly they were! The fellow never washed them apparently. He remembered Chuluha. He had once had a servant named Chuluha. He looked like a djin. Chuluha had a taste for tight vests. He always bought vests a size or two smaller than his chest. It took several people to get him into them and for a little while he could not move his arms freely. He put a vest on only once. It was never taken off. He let it rot until it dropped away in

pieces. These people were not in the habit of washing their clothes.

Bhuvan Shome was something to see when he emerged, wearing a red turban and a straight strip of cloth twisted around his waist. He was bare-chested. The cloth went only as far as his knees. The hair on his chest and back was thick and plentiful. It had not seen the light of day for many years. The wind from the river and the light made him shiver. Bhuvan Shome felt chilly, although it was almost twelve o'clock and the light was strong. He walked briskly. Nokkishore's field was not far. He was feeling better than he had expected. It was not so bad after all. Like being born again. He felt young and less heavy. He reached the field in no time, almost running.

The men were still there. They smiled when they saw him. One of them, younger than the rest, said, "You want ducks so badly you've dressed up like a field hand."

At any other time Bhuvan Shome would have flared up angrily. Now he took the joke in good part, enjoying it. He squatted beside them and said, "It's not that. I'm so greedy for the birds. It's because of a bet. It's a matter of honour. I have to get a duck today. Which way did Bidiya go?"

One of the men rose and left the field. Bhuvan Shome followed him. When he reached the place where he had fired a short time before he found no trace of the birds and Bidiya was not there.

"O, Bidiya, O—O--O—" the man called shrilly, placing a hand behind one ear.

"Don't shout like that. You'll scare the birds away."

The man laughed. The birds were not afraid of them, he said. They stayed where they were. People who work in fields are always shouting at each other. He called again, as loudly as before, with a hand behind his ear. Bidiya gave no sign.

Bhuvan Shome asked the man to bring him a bundle of grain. If he walked along the river bank with the bundle on his head he was sure to find Bidiya sooner or later.

The man brought the bundle and asked for a cigar.

Bhuvan Shome said he had none with him. He would leave a cigar at Bidiya's house when he left.

He lifted the bundle to his head and started walking. Not a bird was to be seen. Kingfishers and terns and the small brown birds in the casuarina trees he had noticed before were the only living things around. He had gone a long way when he heard ducks calling. Then he saw Bidiya. Bidiya had tucked her skirts firmly in at the waist, tied the gun on her back and was wiggling up the side of a sand dune like a serpent. When she reached the top she peered cautiously down on the other side. The river was below her. The girl was very daring. If the loose sand collapsed she would fall to certain death.

Bhuvan Shome held his breath as he watched her. Nothing happened. Bidiya came down. She did not walk, she slid, carrying the gun in her hands. At the bottom she looked carefully around. Then she

saw Bhuvan Shome. She beckoned to him. He went forward. The nearer he came the more clearly he heard the ducks. Then he saw them. He passed very close to them but they did not take flight. Bidiya bent down showing him how to advance with hunched shoulders. When he came up to her she handed him the gun whispering, "There're a lot of big birds. Just under the dune. Go up to the top and fire down at them. They're right under it. Here, give me the gun. I'll carry it. (Crawl up first. I'll hand it to you.)"

Bhuvan Shome did as he was told. He crawled up to the top of the dune just as Bidiya had done. Bidiya came behind him with the gun. He peered over the edge cautiously. There were a lot of ducks directly underneath. There were teals, geese and many other birds game birds.

Bidiya handed him the gun.

He watched the birds for a long time, took aim carefully and fired twice in quick succession. The birds rose screaming into the air. Bidiya ran down.

Shome also came down. Not a single bird dropped.

Six

Almost an hour passed. Bhuvan Shome was sitting on a sand bank beside the Ganges all by himself. He was a strange-looking figure. The red turban on his head was soiled and so were his clothes. Sand was in his hair, on his eyebrows, on his moustache, on his back, on his chest. Sand was of sand. Bidiya had gone to bring some branches. She said that if Shome waited there long enough concealing himself with the casuarina branches, he would see ducks again. He waited hopefully. Bidiya was not lying. Of that he was sure. The ducks would come back. Another thought was in his mind, a surprising thought. All of a sudden he found himself crying. He was a man who had never wept in his life. Bhuvan Shome had not shed a tear when his father died. He had not cried when his mother died or his wife, or little Tagar. There had not been a drop of moisture in his eyes even when Bisundas Marwari foreclosed on his debts, too possession of the house and they were turned out into the street. But today? What had happened?

Did it matter if he had not shot a duck? He was old now. His hand was not as steady as it used to be. It was only natural for him to miss. What was there unusual about it? But he cried like a baby, right in front of the girl. Of course he protested the sand was getting into his eyes and making them water but he knew from the expression on her face that she was not deceived. She had said nothing but she knew all right. She knew. She had stared at him open-mouthed. She was a garrulous child, talking all the time but she had not said another word. As she left she just murmured softly,

"Wait here. Let me bring some branches. The birds will be back. You'll get one this time."

He had to. He could not leave without at least one bird. He'd get one, if he had to sit there all night.

He stared at the sand bank in silence. It was like his life barren. Deserted. Not a living soul anywhere. Not a living thing. People like Bidiya built houses on the sand banks in the river. Boats anchored there, farmers plowed fields, birds came. The sandbank of his life was more like a desert. Not a living soul came anywhere near it. It was desert without a single oasis, without even a mirage. Never mind. Better luck next time. In his next birth? He did not want to be born in this country again.

He paused. No. The country was not to blame. The people he had met that very day—Bhutta, Bhagiya, Bhikhan, Chaturbhuj, Bidiya—were they not good people? Are people in other countries any better? No, the country was not to blame. It was

his own bad luck, his fate—that was at fault.

Bidiya returned, dragging a large bundle of branches. She had a rope too. She was out of breath.

"I've just seen a couple of mallards. Be quick. Let me fix the branches. They haven't come down yet but they will, somewhere here. Quick."

She tied the branches on Shome's head, back, chest, arms. "Hide the gun in the branches in front of you. Have you loaded it again?"

"Yes."

"Stand perfectly still. The mallards are coming this way. Don't move. I'll be waiting in the pea field."

Bhuvan Shome stood there. The branches were all around him. Five minutes. Ten minutes. Fifteen minutes passed. He glanced at his wristwatch without moving his head. Another five minutes. He kept still. They'd come. The birds would come. Bidiya had said they would.

"Ka—aa—"

There they were. A thrill passed through him. He felt as though touched by lightning. But why had the birds stopped calling? Where had they gone? They'd called only once. He wanted to turn his head to see but he didn't dare. Bidiya had warned him not to. She was watching every move he made. He kept quiet.

"Ka—a—a. —Ka—a—a."

How many were there? There seemed to be a lot. He waited, holding his breath.

"Ka—a—a. Ka—a—a."

A pair of doting mallards alighted directly in

front of him. Very close. He let them settle down. He wouldn't fire for a minute or two. He waited. Then he pulled the trigger.

Both the birds rose into the air.

Bhuvan Shome stood there as though turned to stone.

"It's down. One's dropped," Bidiya darted forward swiftly.

"Down? Dropped? Where?" He had seen both the birds rise into the air. He pulled the branches off as quickly as he could untie them. Where was Bidiya? He did not see her. Where had she gone? There she was. Bidiya was running in his direction with a live bird in her hands.

"Here. Take it. One of its legs is hurt. Slightly. It's not badly wounded. It dropped out of fright. Take it with you. Alive. You've won your bet and the bird has not died. That's lucky. You can tame it, if you like. It can be tamed. You know that, don't you?"

Bhuvan Shome could find nothing to say.

Two men came running up from the field. They tied the bird, trussing up its wings and legs so it could not fly away. The duck was a large and beautiful one. The men made a loop in the cord. He could swing it from his hand. One of the men pointed out the black markings on its throat. It was a drake, he said.

Bhuvan Shome returned to Chaturbhuj Gop's house. He was carrying the bird, dangling it from his hand.

Bidiya followed him.

"Are you leaving at once?"

"Yes, it's nearly two o'clock. I've got to go."

"Won't you eat something?"

"No, thanks."

Bhuvan Shome took Makkhur's clothes off, washed and put his own clothes on again. Sand was all over him, grating against his skin. Hesitantly he took a five rupee note out of his wallet. It was the note Bhagiya had picked up and returned to him. He held it out diffidently.

"Buy yourself something," he said.

"Money? Money from you? What are you saying?"

"It's for your men, the people in the field who helped me."

"We don't take money from guests. You don't have to give anything to anybody here." *

What could Bhuvan Shome say after that? He stood there indecisively a few minutes. Then he lifted the gun to his shoulder and said, "Then I'll start on my way. Your men were asking for cigars. Give them these. I must be off. Thank you. Everything was fine."

He picked up the bird.

"Good-bye."

Bidiya bowed to the ground, touching his feet.

"Come again."

"Allright."

Bhuvan Shome set out.

"Listen."

He looked back, turning his head. Bidiya ran up.

"If you meet Shome Saheb please put in a word

for my man——so he won't lose his job."

"Very well. I'll do that. But if it is proven that he has taken bribes Mr. Shome won't be able to do anything for him. Mr. Shome has a job to keep too."

Bhuvan Shome was walking over the dunes. The bird was in his hand and his gun was on his shoulder. He was following the shore line mechanically without paying much attention to where he was going.

He was extremely tired, more tired than he realised

"Ka—a--a"

He jumped. Had the mallard called?

"Ka—a—a."

This time he saw the bird that was calling. It was circling over his head. Was it by any chance the mate of the one he had caught? He kept going.

"Ka- a -a. Ka--a--a. Ka a -a."

The bird was flying in front of him, just above his head

Bhuvan Shome put the trussed bird down on the ground and loaded his gun. He'd shoot this one too. The bird was directly overhead. It swooped lower and close. He fired. Missed. The bird circled. It did not fly away. He watched it with a frown. He fired again. Missed again.

"Let it go," he muttered to himself, picked up the trussed bird and walked on. He had not gone far when he heard the call again.

"Ka--a—a Ka—a—a."

The bird he was carrying struggled to free itself. Bhuvan Shome walked faster. He almost ran. He was out of breath before long and sat down for :

minute.

"Ka—a—a. Ka—a—a. Ka—a—a."

The bird had been flying just ahead of him. It circled overhead when he sat down. Bhuvan Shome put his hand in his pocket. He still had several cartridges. But he did not feel like shooting the bird. It kept crying plaintively as it turned and turned above him.

"Ka—a—a. Ka—a—a. Ka—a—a."

In the distance Bhuvan Shome saw Bhikhan Gop's boat. Nobody was anywhere near it. He felt no inclination to return to Mahender Singh's shack. He made up his mind to walk to the landing.

Bhuvan Shome stood up and began to walk again.

"Ka—a—a. Ka—a—a."

The bird was going with him. Was it going to follow him all the way home? What a nuisance! He kept on going, without looking up; walking fast. The bird stayed with him.

"Ka—a—a. Ka—a—a."

He kept going for half an hour or so. Then a strange thing happened. Bhuvan Shome was not a poet nor a romantic but the idea that began to take shape in his mind was both. In his exhaustion it seemed to him the bird he was carrying away was Sakhi Chand and the one following so faithfully Bidiya. Ka—a—a. Ka—a—a.

The bird seemed to be pleading for mercy. Let him go. Let him go. It seemed to say. Bhuvan Shome heard Bidiya saying, 'If he loses his job I won't be allowed to go to him. He must not lose it.'

The captive bird was struggling, trying to free

itself from Bhuvan Shome's hand.

The sun bent down into the Western sky. Bhuvan Shome walked through the sand of the dunes. The bird circled above him, crying pitifully. His hold on the captive bird was firm. At last he caught sight of a green field. The green rested his eyes. He stopped and stood looking at it gratefully. The green spread before him like a thick carpet. In the centre was a man cutting grass. Bhuvan Shome called him, turning in his direction.

"Come here," he said, "set this bird free. Cut the cords."

The man cut the cords with his scythe. Bhuvan Shome released the bird. It joined the other one instantly. The pair called out happily, soaring away together.

Bhuvan Shome watched them as long as he could see them.

Seven

The boat was late again that evening.

Sakhi Chand Jadav was sitting in his room reading a Bengali novel by Bankim Chatterji with absorbed attention. The book was 'The Lady of the Castle' *Durgeshinandini*. He could not decide which of the heroines was more like Boidehi, Ayesha or Tilottama. The voice of the pointsman, Basadeo, outside the door, startled him out of his reverie.

"Sakhi Chand, the Saheb's here."

"Saheb? Which Saheb?" He picked up his lantern and came out. Oh, for God's sake! It was Bhuvan Shome himself.

Bhuvan Shome turned to Basadeo, "You may go," he said.

Basadeo left.

"Do you have a basil bush in your house?" Bhuvan Shome asked Sakhi Chand a strange question, without any explanation.

"Basil bush? No, Sir "

"I want some leaves."

"There's one at Bose's." Sakhi Chand answer-

ed, "Shall I go and get some?"

"Do that."

Sakhi Chand hurried out. Bhuvan Shome seated himself in a chair and swung his legs. Sakhi Chand was back in a few minutes. He brought a handful of basil leaves.

"Shall I wrap them in a piece of paper?" he asked.

"No. What kind of water do you keep in that pot?"

"Ganges water, Sir."

"Pour some into a bowl."

Sakhi Chand was surprised but he dared not ask any questions. He found a bowl and partially filled it with the holy water.

"Drop the basil leaves into the water. And this copper coin too."

He took a copper coin out of his purse and handed it to Sakhi Chand.

"Now," Shome said, "with your hand on the bowl of holy Ganges water, with the sacred basil leaves and copper coin in it, swear you'll never take a bribe again. What are you staring at? Come on. Pick up the bowl and swear. Do as I tell you. Swear. Say clearly three times, in a loud voice, 'I'll never take a bribe again.' Come on. Speak up."

Sakhi Chand had to obey.

"Don't forget the vow you've just taken," Shome went on, "I'm letting you off this time. Remember. There's one more thing for you to do. Send word to Anil Babu that I'm leaving by this steamer. See

he gets word tonight. Can you do that?"

"I'll go myself, Sir, as soon as my duty's over."

"Tell him I bagged a mallard—"

"Yer, Sir."

Bhuvan Soome got up and went out. Sakhi Chand hurried forward with a lantern but he said, "No, I do not need a light." With that he strode noisily away in the direction of the jetty.

Fifteen days later the postman Jhuksu delivered a pink envelope addressed to Srimati Boidehi Jadav. It's not possible to disclose here all that Sakhi Chand wrote to her at such length. The letter was six pages long. Only the portion relevant to this story will be quoted.

In a postscript Sakhi Chand wrote, "Devi, I have good news for you. Bhuvan Soome has not sent in the report against me. I've been transferred to Sahebgunj. It's a very good station. A lot of extras

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